Texts and Teaching: Books Recommended for Courses

Capturing the Imagination of a Distracted Audience

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We compete for students' attention. Surrounded by smart phones, tablets, and laptops, we compete for their attention, sometimes in the classroom but definitely outside of it. To combat this deluge of distractions, assigned readings must contain attractive content. The challenge can be particularly acute in pre-modern history classes, partly because the language and the content of primary sources, even when translated into clear, modern prose, is often unfathomable to readers accustomed to reading *Sparknotes* or *Wikipedia*. One potential solution to this challenge is Maurice Keen's *Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (rev. ed. New York: Routledge, 2001).

In its fourth edition, Keen's book has proven to be a perennial favorite in the classroom. The reasons for this enduring popularity are fairly transparent. Certainly outlaws constitute an inviting topic for most students. Keen's prose is mostly clear and unassuming. The book also contains both the redacted tales that students crave with the analysis that instructors require. Therefore, Keen's book has remained a standard partly because of its accessible yet informative approach to a wide spectrum of outlaw legends from the very well-known Robin Hood ballads to the lesser known legends of Hereward the Wake, Eustace the Monk, Fulk Fitzwarin, and Gamelyn. William Wallace is even there to demonstrate that one reader's outlaw is another's patriot.

In many respects Keen's book was a seminal work when it first appeared in 1961. It inspired several other works that ultimately undermined his central thesis, namely that the Robin Hood legend emerged from peasant origins. Keen himself recognized the flaws in his initial argument in his introduction to the second edition (1977), noting, "In 1961 I argued, emphatically, that the Robin Hood story rose to popularity in the later middle ages because it gave expression to the social grievances of the 'common people', and I equated the 'common people'—over-exclusively, I think—with rural peasantry. The arguments with which I supported this view, in particular Chapters XI and XIV, do not now seem to be satisfactory."[1] Keen originally believed that the Robin Hood ballads, as they survive today, were written forms of popular stories. In fact, they were meant for recitation, often in the great halls of the gentry. Storytellers likely compiled them from an array of sources and various forms of the legends. Thus, they entertained a wide swath of society, not merely the peasantry. Therefore, the intent of the stories was not merely to communicate the plight of the impoverished members of medieval English society, but rather to amuse diverse audiences by articulating common grievances related to secular government and to a lesser extent ecclesiastical practices.

Keen's introduction to the second edition provides one of the first challenges for students reading the monograph. Some ask, "Why are we reading a book when the author has changed his mind?" It is a question that is worth looking forward to on the first day that the book has been assigned. It has so many answers that prompt numerous questions and debates in return. "What exactly did the author change his mind about?" "What made him change his mind?" "What else is the book about?" "Why does the book remain in print?" "Why do historians continue to rewrite history?" In short, Keen's book is well suited to stimulating discussion, not only about the content of the outlaw legends but also about issues related to historiography.

1 Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend,* rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), xiii.

Before going any further into how the book has been useful in the classroom, it is worth saying something about the historiography that has surrounded the book in the past half century. In the revised introductions, Keen claimed that he was "no longer inclined to argue for an exclusively popular appeal for the Robin Hood ballads," and was instead more likely to follow James Holt's claim "that the original focal centre for the dissemination of Robin's legend was the gentleman's household, 'not in the chamber but in the hall, where the entertainment was aimed not only at the master but also at the members (of the household) and the staff.'"[2] Keen had initially assumed that the hostility toward government and ecclesiastical officials came only from the peasantry and echoed the frustrations evident in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. However, later scholarship revealed that "hostility towards grasping ecclesiastics and corrupt officials was not in any degree exclusive to the peasant class: for high and low alike they were two stock targets for complaint throughout the whole medieval period," or at least from the Norman Conquest until well into the Tudor period. [3]

Addressing the early end of the chronological expanse, Cyril Hart has emphasized that Hereward and his gang in East Anglia had maintained substantial landholdings in that region, further suggesting that Keen's original argument concerning the appeal of the outlaw legends only to impoverished people was flawed.[4] Because they stood to lose a great deal to the Normans, they resisted what they viewed was a grasping dispossession by the Conqueror. At the other end of the period, Sean Field's article "Devotion, Discontent, and the Henrician Reformation: The Evidence of the Robin Hood Stories" has suggested that Robin Hood tales in their various forms reflected

2 Keen, *Outlaws,* xiv. The work to which Keen is here referring is James Holt, *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1999).

3 Keen, *Outlaws,* xv.

4 Cyril Hart, "Hereward the Wake and his Companions," in *The Danelaw* ed. C. R. Hart (London: Hambledon Press, 1992).

contemporary attitudes toward the Reformation.[5] He notes that those familiar with the stories included the broadest possible range in society, from King Henry VIII to the peasantry. Views on such topics as the competence or ineptitude of the clergy and the details of Robin Hood's religion (Protestant or Catholic), as expressed in the stories, varied just as dramatically as did the audience. The outlaw legends have therefore yielded fertile material for an array of historical research. And although this scholarship often varies in terms of its conclusions, it continues to reveal a great deal about life in medieval and early modern England.

Because of this breadth of more recent scholarship, one may reasonably ask, "Why choose Keen's book?" After all, fine collections of outlaw legends exist in various forms, such as Thomas Ohlgren's *Medieval Outlaws*.[6] In short, Keen's work allows instructors to expose students to the process of writing history while also teaching them the history itself. Keen's admission to the alteration of his original conclusions reveals that historians continue to reexamine the sources and further develop the story of the past, something which students new to the discipline may not realize. In addition, the book is fully competent in its recitation of historical fact. Keen provides students with both secondary historical research and summations of the outlaw legends. He therefore introduces students to the work of professional historians and regales them with tales of medieval banditry. Keen himself recognizes the attractiveness of such legends across generations, noting, "the appeal of Robin Hood's story owes much more than I once thought to the glamour that so easily attaches, in any age, to the activities of the 'gentleman bandit' whose misdoings are redeemed by the courage and generosity of his nature and of the manner of his robbing, and have nothing much to do with specifically class tensions, such as those which

5 Sean Field, "Devotion, Discontent, and the Henrician Reformation: The Evidence of the Robin Hood Stories" *Journal of British Studies 41, no. 1* (January 2002): 6-22.

6 *Medieval Outlaws: Ten Tales in Modern Verse,* ed. Thomas Ohlgren (Sutton Publishing, 1998).

surfaced in the course of the Peasants' Revolt."[7] The outlaw legends were stories for every man, not bound by class or chronology. The topic has inspired numerous major motion pictures and television series, including the recent movie *Robin Hood* (2010) and the *Robin Hood* series which ran for three seasons on BBC, beginning in 2006. However, the entertainment industry does not hold a monopoly on this fascinating topic, and Keen's work allows for academics to take full advantage of its appeal while also exposing students to historical fact and methodology.

In the classroom *Outlaws of Medieval Legend* contains material appropriate for both lower and upper division courses. In the lower level and lecture courses, it enlivens the staples of High Medieval English History: Hereward resisted the Norman Conquest; Fulk opposed the tyranny of King John; William Wallace battled the minions of Edward I. By conveying and explaining stories about heroic figures who participated in these events, the book encourages students to ask how much of the legends is true. Once the students are curious, the book has done a large part of its job. They can come to lecture to learn more details, but if they show up for lecture wanting to know those details, half of the battle is already won. Once they are interested, we can do some heavier lifting.

One of the objectives of our introductory courses is the development of critical thinking skills. Along these lines Keen's book works well, particularly as it challenges students to recognize that the lines between fact and fiction are sometimes blurry, especially during the Middle Ages. Keen provides some insight into the historical evidence surrounding the legends. For example, Hereward the Wake appears as a landholder of some substance in the *Domesday Book*. And while we must be careful to avoid acceptance of all the feats associated with Hereward's resistance to William the Conqueror and the Earl Warrene, we must be equally careful to avoid dismissing all evidence presented in the *Gesta Herewardi*. In

7 Keen, *Outlaws,* xv.

other words, it is okay to be uncertain about the historicity of certain elements of the legend. This grey area is, after all, a matter for some speculation, conjecture, and perhaps even research. By encouraging students to keep an open mind until decisive evidence appears, we presumably promote critical thinking skills.

Beyond the historicity of the legends, we also consider the utility of the fictions within the work. Of course we do not always know what constitutes fiction in a legend; however, Keen is particularly adept at helping his reader identify recurring literary devices inherent in outlaw legends. Disguises, cunning, and an ability to live off of the land often accompany the outlaws' superhuman strength. These literary figures embodied the heroic archetypes of the society that perpetuated them. Hereward, Eustace, Fulk, Gamelyn, Wallace, and Robin all possessed the equivalent of street smarts, another attractive element of these stories, not only for medieval audiences, but also for students of the twenty-first century.

Keen's book is also useful for more advanced courses, such as seminars, where considerations of historical methods are more commonly considered. How, for example, does Keen date the emergence of the Robin Hood legend in oral form? The question seems straightforward enough, but many students fail to distinguish the emergence of the legends in print during the early 1500s from the ballads' fourteenth-century roots in oral tradition. The key piece of evidence here is the reference to "the rymes of Robin Hood" in the B-text of William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (1377). By indicating that Robin's story was more familiar to a parish priest than the Lord's Prayer, Langland suggests that the stories enjoyed some popularity by the end of Edward III's reign (1327-1377). Other pieces of evidence within the ballads also suggest their formation earlier in the reign: the idealization of the yeoman archers, who became war heroes in the decades leading up to the Treaty of Bretigny (1360); the references to "good" King Edward, likely a reference to Edward III; and mentions of livery and maintenance, common plagues on the judicial system of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

This evidence is somewhat inconclusive and imprecise in terms of dating the initial emergence of the oral legends of Robin. For example, Keen suggests that Edward I (1272-1307) might have qualified as "good King Edward" though Edward II (1307-1327) probably did not. Why? By asking students to explain Keen's argument for dating the emergence of Robin's legend to the reign of Edward III, we give them an opportunity to understand not only how to construct an argument based on evidence but also how to recognize that the argument, though persuasive, is somewhat less than conclusive. In other words, we explore how the reconstruction of the past often involves arranging diverse pieces of evidence into an insightful conceptual framework. Keen's book offers an opportunity to demonstrate to students in fairly simple and entertaining terms how historical interpretations follow from honest and creative interpretations of evidence and how they can remain open to later criticism and reformulation. It provides a window into the processes of argumentation and revision associated with historiography.

Whether it is part of introductory lecture classes or of more advanced seminars, Keen's book also illuminates topics related to British political and social history. More specifically it addresses the relationship between law and justice particularly as they pertain to property. Aristocratic outlaws, such as Fulk and Eustace, portrayed the nobility's enduring and pervasive concerns with inheritance and wardship. These baronial outlaws shared these property concerns with knights (Gamelyn) and yeomen (Robin) to produce a common sense of justice that transcended class, language, and culture. Whether the grasping lord was King John or the local sheriff, outlaws shared a common opposition to tyranny and injustice. Whether the legend was a chivalric metrical Romance in French or a more humble ballad in English, composers of these tales recognized that audiences craved stories about successful opposition to greedy and corrupt administrators of the common law.

This focus of Keen's analysis provides us with opportunities to explain the development and corruption of the common law. We explore how the longing for justice, particularly in matters of property, inspired the development of early common law writs of *Morte D'ancestor* and *Novel Disseisin* during the twelfth century. We also explore how the successful implementation of common law brought enormous power to the crown. Although this power could intoxicate the monarch (John), the legends typically portray the legal corruption of lesser royal officials. Therefore, the legends exposed how sheriffs, the gentry, and retainers of lords could manipulate the legal system to confiscate property unjustly. This property could vary in size from Gamelyn's humble holdings in an unnamed shire to Fulk's estates in Shropshire. However, the methods were often the same. Gamelyn's tale tells us of bribed jurors and corrupt sheriffs; the Robin Hood ballads make reference to problems associated with livery and maintenance.

Throughout this discussion Keen explains that the outlaw legends did not represent a desire to undermine the hierarchy that perpetuated this corruption. Instead they reflected a determination to replace corrupt officials in the hierarchy with more righteous men. According to Keen, this limited objective indicated the inherently conservative character of high and late medieval political and social discontent. Outlaws of medieval legends created their own hierarchies and often revered the king (with the exception of John), as a just figure whose noble rule was thwarted by corrupt officials. The outlaws and Robin Hood in particular sought to correct injustice partly in order to preserve the dignity of the crown. They attacked corrupt officials while maintaining respect for social and political hierarchy. The outlaws' attitudes toward religion and the ecclesiastical hierarchy provide other opportunities for discussion. First it is worth noting how secular even the early legends were, though clerics typically wrote them in a very religious age. In addition, the outlaws' use of magic seems to have received approbation from these authors. Both Fulk and Eustace relied on magic to overcome their enemies.

Indeed, Eustace the Monk studied magic from Mephistopheles in Toledo. How can we explain this apparently benign treatment of magic by medieval Christian authors? The question can stimulate interesting conversations or papers.

Perhaps a more comfortable topic of discussion for many students is the legends' treatment of ecclesiastical figures. Monks and abbots were conspicuously corrupt in the Robin Hood ballads. Robin's most formidable enemy may have been the Abbot of St. Mary's York. This animus toward greedy clergy in the ballads corresponded with the decline of ecclesiastical prestige in general and with the emergence of Lollardy in particular. Keen points out that Robin's piety was conventional and that he maintained a special relationship with the Virgin Mary. Nevertheless, it is worth asking what characteristics Robin may have shared with Lollards, if only to ascertain that elements of anticlericalism were not confined to those groups designated as heretics during the Late Middle Ages.

If you are seeking a work that is laden with historical facts that students can memorize and repeat on tests, this book is not for you. Ultimately, it is a work that requires some guidance from an instructor who is familiar with the details of the Conquest, the emergence of common law, the tyrannies of John and of Edward I, and ultimately of the successes of good King Edward III. Keen's references to historical artifacts, such as the longbow, can launch discussions about the Hundred Years War, but the book is not going to explain English victories at Halidon Hill or Crécy. Instead, it raises awareness about life in a very different era and encourages its readers to want to know more. Nevertheless, it is possible to test students on the outlaws' spheres of operations, on their methods of resistance, and on the languages and sources that either contain their legends or attest to their historicity. Keen makes this information available for the readers' consideration.

The appeal of these legends both in the past and in the present is one of the main strengths of Keen's book in the classroom. Clearly more scholarly and thorough treatments of the subject have occurred since Keen first published his work in 1961. However, in many ways these later works provide opportunities for students interested in the subject to deepen their knowledge, not only of British history but also of historical methods, perhaps while developing a taste for the pleasures that history has to offer.

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