



1999

Review Essay: R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor. *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw*

Julian Wasserman
Loyola University, New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wasserman, Julian (1999) "Review Essay: R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor. *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw*," *Quidditas*: Vol. 20 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol20/iss1/18>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

religious discourses and those who created them and engaged them in the religio-politics of early modern period.

Eugene R. Cunnar
New Mexico State University

R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor. *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw*. Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, Ltd., 1997. 332 pp.

Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren. *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997. 723 pp.

In recent medieval scholarship, few revivals have been as vibrant as the regreening of what had been the all too easily dismissed field of “Robin Hood Studies.” Indeed, in the preface to their newly revised *Rymes of Robyn Hood* (1997), Dobson and Taylor note “the remarkable expansion of academic study on the outlaw hero during the last twenty years (greater no doubt than during the previous two centuries)” (x). Certainly there can be little doubt that a major impetus to that “remarkable expansion” was the original publication, in 1976, of the Dobson-Taylor text, itself. Yet this latest revival of interest in the greenwood hero might well be credited in large part to the 1994 publication of Stephen Knight’s *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*.

Most recently Knight and Thomas Ohlgren have produced a competing classroom text, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (1997), bringing Robin Hood studies to a fork in the road, with paths leading to ends as separate and related as Barnesdale and Sherwood, the competing locales of the outlaw legend. While the two classroom texts apply remarkably different scholarly and pedagogical approaches to virtually the same corpus of ballads, plays, and rhymes, both volumes find their respective marks, although their aims and target audiences differ. The road to Barnesdale; the road to Sherwood: Dobson and Taylor or Knight and Ohlgren, it all depends where you stand critically/pedagogically and what your allegiances are. And there’s argument, and now a text, for each.

In many ways, the fork in the road is similar to one encountered previously in the study of *Beowulf*, a work at one time viewed primarily as an historical, philological document—often at the expense of considerations of the poem’s literary merit. Tolkien’s famous essay on “The Monsters and the Critics” in many ways altered the course of scholarship by foregrounding the Anglo-Saxon poem’s literary possibilities. Dominated until recently by questions of philology, textual transmission, and above all the

historical reality of Robin Hood, the study of the Sherwood outlaw has undergone a similar metamorphosis.

While it would be an exaggeration to say that Knight's 1994 study was the equivalent of Tolkien's 1936 essay, Knight's volume clearly signaled an altered direction, if not a new critical path, at least in terms of literary criticism as practiced in the 1990s. Knight's is an essentially social reading, one influenced by Marxist approaches, taking as its major themes appropriations and gentrification.

That Robin Hood studies have come to such a fork in the road is readily apparent in the two classroom texts' treatment of historical background. Anyone who has taught medieval literature knows the dilemma. Exactly how important is background and at what point does one introduce it to the course? Does one begin the semester with a lengthy "background" lecture (historical and cultural context) or does one leap headlong into the subject text supplying such background along the way?

Not surprisingly, Dobson and Taylor take the former approach, providing a lengthy and detailed historical context (27 pages of "Foreword" and 67 pages of "Introduction") as the primary approach to the material, although each work is also introduced by a brief two to three page headnote, usually historical/ philological in nature.

Knight and Ohlgren naturally provide a much briefer nineteen-page general introduction, with well-developed headnotes that focus on interpretive issues, while manuscript and explanatory notes are reserved for the end of the sections devoted to individual works. Dobson and Taylor, reflecting an essentially historically focused approach, spend some sixteen pages of front matter discussing the quest for historical Robin Hood, while Knight and Ohlgren, whose interests are more critically/literally minded, dismiss the issue in a single page (4-5).

Part of what allows Knight and Ohlgren to turn their attentions to other matters is no doubt a profound change in our notions of literature and what constitutes literary inquiry since the publication of the Dobson-Taylor text in 1976. As long as "literature" was closely associated with "high culture," the Robin Hood material, as ballads, was bound to suffer neglect in favor of, say, *The Canterbury Tales* or the courtly Arthurian cycle. However, with the change in approach to literature as arena for cultural considerations of such issues as class and gender, Robin Hood could now be the focus of "literary" attentions such as those of Knight's 1994 study.

In contrast, Dobson and Taylor's notion of scholarship is to rescue the legend from the "clutches" of the lower (or at least less intellectual) classes. Thus they observe, "Even before the first edition of this volume appeared... historians and critics had begun to rescue the greenwood hero from the clutches of the local enthusiast" (ix).

That a literary/interpretive approach is for Dobson and Taylor a road not taken is quite evident in their text. While the 1997 preface to Dobson and Taylor does note “the remarkable expansion of academic study... during the last twenty years, the two scholars tellingly complete the sentence by candidly adding that this “expansion... has naturally not left our opinions completely unaltered”(x). This is neither gentlemanly nor British understatement—although Dobson and Taylor are both—for their understanding of the texts has, indeed, hardly been altered at all from what it was in 1976. It’s their bibliography, not their essential vision of the material, that has been updated in their 1997 revision.

Although the new Dobson and Taylor edition does of necessity recognize Knight, Dobson and Taylor continually attack his 1994 work as “vigorously iconoclastic” (xxvii) in order to champion their historical approach, asserting that the historical evidence “leave[s] one in little doubt that by the end of the Middle Ages a tolerably coherent and largely self-consistent greenwood outlaw legend had indeed been fully articulated” (xxix). Claiming “that the early ballads can be analyzed in terms considerably more precise than the allegory or symbolized ‘ideality’ which Professor Knight seems to prefer,” Dobson and Taylor insist that it is Knight’s “very reluctance to accept a traditionally historical approach to the greenwood legend which makes his treatment of the late medieval ballads of Robin Hood the least convincing part of his book” (xxix).

In the end, Dobson and Taylor take to defending “history” as well as historical praxis from Knight’s “attempt to demolish the most important new documentary evidence for the early development of the legend” (xxx) along with his “curiously obsessive distrust of allegedly empirical historians’ [which] often seems to do more to obscure than to clarify the search for the medieval origins and the nature of the legend” (xxx).

Dobson and Taylor’s purpose, then, has as its goal a type of literary archeology, a “search for origins” exactly paralleling early *Beowulf* studies. For Dobson and Taylor, historical context is both the end product as well as the informing context of study of Robin Hood. For Knight and Ohlgren, these are something quite different, and the two divergent views result in two different pedagogical approaches and two different textbooks.

Perhaps the best way to bring the differences into focus is to compare the two introductions to the ballad, “Robin and the Potter.” Knight and Ohlgren begin with a single paragraph that duly notes that the ballad exists in a single manuscript and was not reprinted until 1795. They briefly, almost in passing, note the relationship between the ballad and a sixteenth-century play which begins with a potter.

In contrast to the brevity of Knight and Ohlgren, Dobson and Taylor, in keeping with their quest for “origins,” observe that the ballad “may be

reckoned the second in point of antiquity of the Robin Hood series” (123). They not only describe the “unique” status of the manuscript but also its provenance, form (“24 leaves with approximately 30 lines to each page”), and go so far as to provide a full-page reproduction of its opening lines (125) so that readers might observe the scribe’s “clear bastard hand.” They go on not only to note that the ballad is contained in an anthology “compiled with no obvious principle” but to list the other works contained in the manuscript. Pointing to its “unusually corrupt orthography,” Dobson and Taylor speculate on its origins by finding the ballad to be either “extremely carelessly” transcribed or an “orally transmitted version written down by a semi-literate ‘minstrel.’”

In regard to those minstrel origins, Dobson and Taylor note, “Like ‘Robin Hood and the Monk,’ ‘Robin Hood and the Potter’ will always be one of the few fundamental sources for any attempt to describe both the evolution of the Robin Hood legend and the development of the English popular ballad.” As consideration of that development, Dobson and Taylor remark that the ballad relies on a “direct form of address closer to the minstrel style.”

Noting that “Robin Hood and the Potter” “uses dialogue more than other early Robin Hood ballads...” (59) and quoting Dobson and Taylor directly in terms of the ballad’s use of “direct form of address,” the more hermeneutically minded Knight and Ohlgren find this same feature not indicative of origin but rather to be the basis for interpretation of the class issues that are the focus of their interest: “These subtleties may be thematic. At the beginning and end the ballad asserts the elusive value of good yeomanry and it may well be that this text, like other early Robin Hood ballads is something of an exploration and realization of just what values might be.”

More remarkably the difference in the two volumes is brought into high relief as each text notes that “Robin and the Potter” contains the essential elements of the Robin Hood legend. Of course, it’s the clear diversity in the two sets of essential elements that’s revealing. Dobson and Taylor, in keeping with their historical/anthropological approach, describe the ballad as containing the “most popular ingredients in the later Tudor and Stuart legend: single and by no means inevitably successful combat with one adversary; dramatic victory in an archery competition; and inveiglement of a remarkably naive sheriff into the ‘ffeyre forest’ where he was completely at Robin’s mercy” (125). Clearly most of these “ingredients” are structural in nature. On the other hand, Knight and Ohlgren see in the ballad “a set of themes central to the myth” (58). Unlike the “popular ingredients” listed by Dobson and Taylor, those listed by Knight and Ohlgren are largely “thematic” rather than structural in nature: “Robin as yeoman among yeomen; recurrent suspicion of towns

and its activity; Robin's innate skill at archery; the full and free ethics of the forest" (58). Just as Dobson and Taylor's detailed description of the manuscript stands in counterpoint to Knight and Ohlgren's abbreviated treatment, so Dobson and Taylor's brief observation about class (the ballad's "flatter[ing] the aspirations of the lesser craftsmen") is offset by Knight and Ohlgren's extended paragraph on the ballad's "suspicion of towns and business practices" as well as the way in which "the world of mercantile values is mocked and dismissed" (58). Venturing further into a part of the contemporary critical forest left unexplored by Dobson and Taylor, Knight and Ohlgren assert that Robin and the sheriff "fought in part on the terrain of masculinity" noting that "the only text that shows Robin in relation to any woman (except the Virgin Mary and the treacherous Prioress)" (58).

Finally, experienced campers will know that in the woods, whether Barnesdale or Sherwood, equipment, as well as attitude, often makes the difference in the quality of the campout, and these two Robin Hoods are differently outfitted. In keeping with their interests in historical context and textual transmission, Dobson and Taylor provide a very helpful map of "Robin Hood Country" along with a valuable set of appendices, including "Titles and First Lines of Robin Hood Ballads," "A Note on the Sloane Manuscript Life of Robin Hood," "A Selection of Proverbs of Robin Hood," "A Select List of Robin Hood Place-Names," and "Principle Printed Editions of the Robin Hood Ballads." The appendix, "Robin Hood in Literature," is simply a treasure, not only useful but essential for study of the history and development of the outlaw legend. Dobson and Taylor also include a number of texts not found in Knight and Ohlgren. In five cases, Dobson and Taylor provide alternate versions of ballads, as well as postmedieval works by Keats, Noyes, Johnson, and Tennyson. There is even a text of the "Ballad of Jesse James." Also impressive is the fact that Dobson and Taylor provide an index.

Readers of Knight and Ohlgren will, no doubt, sorely miss these amenities. For their part, Knight and Ohlgren clearly have the more useful bibliography, the editors having opted for select bibliographies following each individual work, often with specific page citations. In the end, this approach is probably more useful than the Dobson and Taylor method of simply appending forty-one titles published since the compilation of their 1976 bibliography. By placing line-keyed textual and explanatory notes after works, Knight and Ohlgren are able to provide more glosses and general information than do Dobson and Taylor, whose annotations are limited by their placement at the bottom of the page.

Finally, in the matter of form, Dobson and Taylor opt for double-column layout and, at least to these tired eyes, a somewhat small typeface. Knight and Ohlgren instead have chosen a single-column, larger-print for-

mat, thereby providing ample room for side glosses and plenty of space for readers' annotations. The result of this divergence in format is that the Dobson-Taylor edition (which contains more material) runs 332 pages while Knight-Ohlgren comes in at a whopping 723. While both volumes are illustrated, the Knight-Ohlgren text has 44 to Dobson and Taylor's 17.

One of the most notable features of this most recent Robin Hood revival has been its emphasis on pedagogy, including as it has teaching sessions and the distribution of sample syllabi. No doubt this revival will lead to a wealth of new courses entering the curriculum. In our rush to teach Robin Hood, each of us must decide what type of courses we are teaching: Advanced courses in which manuscript issues are appropriate, or courses where students come with little, or even no, background in the Middle Ages. Are they to be exclusively or primarily medieval courses or modern ones? Should the primary focus be on Robin Hood in particular or on the outlaw genre in general? Do we stress historical particulars or anthropological/folklore universals? Should such courses be modeled on those treating Arthurian literature which are favorites with nonmajors? The answers to these questions will most likely dictate the choice of text. What is obvious is that Robin Hood studies are richer for the choice.

Julian Wasserman
Loyola University, New Orleans

Anna Battigelli. *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998.

In an address to the reader of her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), Margaret Cavendish, duchess of Newcastle (1623–1673) remarks that her philosophy, being new, is not yet understood, but that posterity might regard her ideas more highly. Margaret Cavendish's time has come. For three centuries or so, Cavendish's life and writings were all but forgotten. Today, most of Cavendish's texts are (or soon will be) readily available in print or on-line. Many undergraduates, as well as graduate students, are now studying and enjoying her books, especially *Description of a New...Blazing World*. During the past two decades, the patient labor of feminist scholars has not only transformed our understanding of the early modern context in which Cavendish wrote, but has also articulated interpretative strategies by which her writings might be read with profit and pleasure. The Margaret Cavendish Society (established in 1997) is a lively international community, which has met twice, in Oxford (1997) and Paris (1999), and will meet again, in 2001, at