The 'Mistery' of Robin Hood: a New Social Context for the Texts

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Le Moyen Age tardif se caractérise par une dynamique très accélerée des changements dans la reparation sociale. . . Aux XIVe et XVe siècles s'accomplit en France, comme dans la majorité des autres pays du continent européen, une mutation dans les tendances à long terme du développement économique. A cette mutation s'associe un processus d'affaiblissement de certains liens sociaux et de renforcement de certains autres: notre attention se porte ici sur les problèmes de structures.[1]

The recent debate on the nature and origin of the Robin Hood ballads has been conducted not by literary critics but by social historians; that fact emphasises the importance of these ballads as a register of the popular consciousness of the time.[2] Two major interpretations of the original context of the ballads have emerged. One view, put forward by R.H. Hilton, sees them as a 'by-product of the agrarian social struggle' which took place from the late thirteenth century through to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381: this view sees the ballads realising in fiction the discontents of the workers and small landholders who were badly affected by agrarian problems and were active in protests against the prevailing system. M.Keen originally presented evidence and argument in support of Hilton, but retracted it and came to agree with a paper by J.C. Holt, which quite contradicted Hilton's position. Holt argued that the ballads 'were designed primarily for a gentle audience' and that they only achieved popularity with the lower orders through performance in the communal and convivial atmosphere of the halls of the gentry. According to Holt, this was an audience concerned not with 'alleged or actual' class conflict, but with 'hospitality and its formalities, and the precedence which arose from service and status.'

This controversy raises issues which seem to me still unresolved and which need to be reconsidered both at a theoretical and general level and also in terms of specific details. One of the problems rises from the fact that

both Hilton and Holt are concerned with "origins." The theoretic assumption is that (different) particular historic events gave birth directly to the ballads, and that the full meaning of the cycle can be located in this original moment. Difficulties arise from this position, if only because the material evidence disintegrates before any such moment is attained, involving the historians in a certain amount of speculation or invention. The earliest extant ballad was recorded in the mid-15th century, well after the first reference in 1377 to an already flourishing Robin Hood tradition. For those ballads that have survived, Child's ordering in his major ballad-collection[3] must, in the absence of any definitive dating, suffice as a rough chronological guide, suggesting that only five ballads survive directly from the medieval oral tradition, with perhaps six more ballads and the more extended *Gest* derived in part from that tradition (Child 117-121 and 122-127).

That is all the evidence that exists for the forms the legend took when these ballads were active—that is, from the mid-14th century, at the earliest, to the end of the 15th century when print was popularised. It is not possible, from this evidence, to determine whether anything different, or anything at all, appeared before this time, and the extant ballads themselves provide no one event which could conclusively serve as the desired starting-point for the legend. A historical study concerned with concrete events will have to be satisfied with an examination of the relation of the cycle to the social formation in which it actually appears, and forego a search for the elusive moment of birth. But, aside from material problems, the theory of origins has two weaknesses. Firstly, it is a reflectionist theory, ignoring the transformations that social structures undergo in order to enter literary discourse. Secondly it denies the political significance of works outside their presumed moment of origin, the constant shifts of meaning as the works are restated, sometimes in altered form, in different social contexts.

Another basic problem has handicapped the controversy in its search for the true context of the Robin Hood ballads. It is evident that both Hilton and Holt share one premise—they both examine the ballads in a rural, manorial situation, albeit from opposed class positions within that situation. However, a reading of the ballads of medieval origin reveals this to be an unargued and an unjustifiable premise: there is simply no reference there to the social economy of the manor. The action of all the ballads is played out across a dichotomy of town and forest. In the ballads the forest never appears as an extension to agricultural economy, but as a wilderness devoid of social restrictions at the edge of the town. The town itself, almost invariably Nottingham, is the sole locus of social imagery—of occupation, trade and political structures—for the cycle. For example, most of the stated occupations of characters are town-oriented—sheriff, porter, jailer, potter, butcher, clerics, pinder, tanner, cook. While some of these crafts may have been carried on in manorial economy, in the ballads they are all specifically located within the town. The only other occupation represented in the ballads is knighthood, and none of the three knights appears in a social setting appropriate for a representative of the landed gentry. The knight in the *Gest* is the only one to receive sympathetic treatment, and he is an emasculated figure wholly dependent on the work of a lower class for his

restoration to economic power (the text itself expresses unease at such a contradiction of accepted ideology:

> It was neuer the maner, by dere worthi God,
> A yoman to pay for a knyhht. 37³⁻⁴).

Neither Red Roger (in *Robin Hood's Death*) or Guy of Gisbourne is depicted as deriving from or now existing in any specific economic context. They appear as "strangers," as the latter is termed, aliens in the non-manorial world of the ballads, each offering a mortal, almost supernatural, threat to Robin Hood. Neither could be said to provide the mechanism of identification for an audience in the way Holt's theory would require. In contrast, a standard motif of the cycle is Robin's exchange of identity with a town craftsman, providing a clearly perceived relation in the ballads themselves between the hero and this particular social grouping.

The dominance of the town as a source of social imagery would seem to justify a closer examination of the connections between medieval town economy and the ballads. It might be argued that at the time there was little differentiation between rural and urban society. Yet the ballads themselves, by their silence on manorial economy, make the distinction necessary. It will be the aim of this paper to relate the social imagery which actually appears in the ballads to the period in which the ballads are known to have been active—to trace out the associations of key elements and structures of the cycle in an urban context. It might be noted at the outset that although this involves a complete rejection of Holt's thesis it is not entirely antipathetic to that of Hilton. Hilton is concerned with a roughly equivalent period, whereas Holt ventures back to the beginning of the thirteenth century, and it is worth recalling that the 'Peasants' Revolt' is something of a misnomer, since urban craftsmen were equally active in that uprising.

There can be little doubt that the concept of 'yeomanry' provides the most important link between the ballads and the social formation which produced them. The term or one of its derivatives occurs about seventy times in the ballads of medieval origin. In dealing with the term, Holt refers only, of course, to usages relevant to the land, where he places it in the succession yeoman, squire, knight, with the yeoman 'an established and in no way menial member of a lord's or gentleman's household.'

If we look, however, to the town usage of the word, a different picture emerges. In his influential work on London craft society George Unwin had this to say: 'as to the social status of the yeomanry at the earlier period, there cannot be the smallest doubt—they are invariably journeyman or serving-men. . . the yeoman at the end of the 14th century was a journeyman on strike.'⁴ At the time of the earliest recorded Robin Hood ballads, then, the term had an ambiguous and shifting signification within the rather static hierarchy of medieval social status, which enabled it to move fairly freely between the different contexts of the town and land. This is perhaps partly due to the fact that the newly-emergent towns, though they could be considered 'non-feudal islands in the feudal seas,' naturally tended to adopt the ill-fitting ideological structures of the dominant feudal mode of production, an ideological version of culture-lag.

The gilds, for instance, while operating according to a different economic

framework, are in part structured on the pyramidal manorial model. A small minority holds political and economic power over a mass of workers without political status in the organisation, but whose rights are theoretically guaranteed by their masters, with the whole forming a hierarchical totality unified within each particular industry, rather than dividing on a class basis across industries. The gilds even adopted liveries in imitation of manorial custom. This kind of ideology-lag has its counterpart in the culture-lag of the ballads. If it is true that the ballads deal with issues relevant to an urban lower-class audience, it is also evidently true that they are only able to deal with these issues insofar as they are expressed in the terms of an already-available value-system from the land (and this is perhaps one reason why historians persist in reading them in rural terms). So 'yeoman' is a word with rural connotations that can be adapted to urban purposes.

The inevitable tension that arose from the incongruity of the economic base of town life and its ideological superstructure also has its counterpart in the ballads. For example, this passage from the *Gest*, almost certainly written by the compiler rather than derived from original ballad material, would seem to comply with Holt's account of 'yeoman':

> But loke ye do no husbonde harme,
> That tilleth with his ploughe.
> No more ye shall no gode yeman
> That walketh by grene-wode shawe;
> Ne no knyght ne no squyer
> That wol be a gode felawe. 13³-14⁴

In presenting a schematic hierarchy of society the conventional figures from the land are naturally used, and the yeoman can be readily located within this framework. But when the yeoman is actually dramatised in the ballads, he appears in guises that do not accord with this image. In the *Gest* itself, for example, a town cook is called a 'fayre yeman' (178¹), and indeed "yeman and knaves" is used as a generic term for the townspeople of Nottingham (492²), as it is in *Robin Hood and the Monk* (74²); these are the two ballads Child cites as forming the "golden age" of Robin Hood ballads.

In other instances the word is used to denote a potter, a tanner, a friar, a page, a groom, and various other kinds of servants. It is also used to denote the knight in *Sir Guy of Gisbourne*, but Sir Guy scarcely appears in this ballad as a typical representative of his class. If anything emerges from the use of the world 'yeman' in the ballads it is once again its unusual social mobility in contrast to the typical fixity of medieval social relations. The word's meaning and the changing possibilities of mastery enables the word to move from its superior connotation in the lord's manor to the more menial situation of the master's workshop.

It has been suggested already that the fluidity of the social connotations of the word 'yeoman' constitute something of a threat to the ordered hierarchy of medieval social ideology. The notion of mobility seems intimately bound up with the term—even in the formal succession of the *Gest* he is on the move, the 'gode yeman that walketh by grene-wode shawe,' and a typical situation of the ballads is Robin's meeting with a yeoman

travelling to a new town. If the actual social relations of the class that can be gathered under the term 'yeoman' are investigated, it can be seen that they constituted something more than a merely ideological threat to medieval order, and that it was in fact precisely from this class that bands of mobile, outlaw criminals were drawn.

The single most significant event to generate the mobility of serving-men and undermine their structural links with the established order was of course the plague of 1348. The resultant shortage of labour gave workers such bargaining power they were able to demand higher wages or shift where such wages were available, giving rise to a substantial movement of the peasantry from farms to the towns, where they sought unskilled craft and menial occupations. It gave rise, as well, to the Statute of Labourers in 1349, which was applied equally to town craftsmen as to the peasantry, as is made clear by the extensive lists of artificers or craftsmen charged through the century, many of whom were outlawed for failing to appear at the proceedings.[5]

From petitions to parliament of the period it appears that this newly-created class of under-privileged urban workers formed the basis for the emergence of a criminal society. A typical petition of 1378 complains that 'servants and laborers' are refusing to serve or work, and are moving to towns to become 'artificers,' and others of 1372 and 1376 complain that in doing so, such 'rebels' are giving 'example et confort' to all servants, so that masters dare not challenge or displease their servants, and grant them their will, even in contravention of the Statute. Such workers often become 'mendinant beggeres,' but 'la greyndre partie des ditz Servantz. . . devenent fortes larounes, rencrecent de eux roberies et felonies de jour en altre.'[6]

One of the few relatively contemporary references that locates the Robin Hood outlaw band in a specific social setting is another well-known petition to parliament, of 1439, complaining of the activities of 'one Piers Venables' and 'many othere unknowen,' who 'in manner of Insurrection, wente into the wodes, in that Contre, like it hadde be Robynhode and his meyne.'[7] It has been noted that Piers is called 'Gentilman' in the petition, though 'havynge no liflode no sufficeante of goods,' but what has not, I think, received comment is that the fourteen of his followers that are named are all called 'towne yeomen.' On the basis of their surnames (not the most reliable of evidence, but the only basis available in this case), it appears that indeed these town yeomen are artisan journeymen. A Buchere, a Taillour, a Flecchere, and three Smyths comprise the total of occupational surnames.

It would seem, then, at least in the mind of this parliamentary petitioner (a member of the landed gentry), that the Robin Hood legend is directly linked to the activities of this urban lower class, and to the circumstances that gave rise to the earlier petitions already mentioned. Regrettably, there has been, so far as I can discover, no rigorous analytic investigation of this urban situation in England. There has, however, recently been a fine study of the 'marginaux' of 14th and 15th century Paris by the Polish historian Bronoslaw Geremek and the analysis and conclusions he draws provide strong support for the anecdotal evidence of this paper.[8]

If the ballads are read in the context of the historical situation of mobile craftsmen, a certain subversive quality becomes evident, such as was

clearly felt by the petitioner to parliament of 1439. The very image of the lone figure of the craftsman on the move, as we have with the potter, the butcher and the tanner, contains something of a threat to order. More particularly, there are in the ballads precise instances of workers contravening the Statute of Labourers, and in doing so giving 'comfort and example to all servants,' as well as revealing the close links between this activity and outright criminality. So, for example, the Jolly Pinder, in phrases that echo through many of the ballads, vows to leave his present master for the better pay that Robin offers. So, too, the activities of Little John and the Sheriff's cook in the *Gest*, as well as being again in contravention of the Statute, recall precisely the terms Geremek uses in his description of typical urban criminal life: 'le service dans une maison bourgeoise ou noble va de pair avec des operations de brigandage, lorsque l'occasion s'en presente.'[9] In accepting or seeking better wages workers place themselves outside that economic and social framework that wages provide—they become out-laws, thieves.

The term 'yeoman,' in an urban context, operated at the time not only generally with reference to a specific class, but also as a particular rank within the organisation of the gilds. It is in this latter sense that Unwin relates the word to a 'journeyman or covenant servant working for wages,' as one 'outside full membership of the gild.'[10] Such journeymen occasionally attempted to form their own fraternities—for example that of the serving-men of the saddlers, 'called yeomen,' which in 1383 had its own livery and governors, and the 1415 reference to the brotherhood of 'yeomen taillours,' which also used its own livery.[11] Until about the middle of the 15th century, however, when they began to be absorbed into the framework of the established gilds, these organisations were suppressed by the masters on suspicion of attempting wage rises. There are aspects of the Robin Hood band in the ballads that can be associated with these suppressed groups, and these will be discussed at a later point. For the moment, it is enough to point out that 'an outlaw band of yeomen' is as much the description of a journeyman fraternity as it is a criminal band.

Although there is a considerable body of work dealing with the gilds, the embryonic yeoman fraternities rarely rate much more than a paragraph in this literature. It is true that work done about the turn of the century displays considerable interest in the phenomenon, but it seems that at that time there was very little evidence available from which to draw conclusions.[12] Later work has been more concerned with the relationship of gilds to other town organisations than with their internal tensions, although there are indications that this emphasis is beginning to change.[13] If, then, we are to understand exactly what relation the yeoman gilds bear to the development of the Robin Hood legend, it will be necessary to investigate the character of the movement more fully.

Looking through the published court records of the 14th century it becomes clear just how extensive this movement was. In 1298-9 Walter de Maydenstan was charged with 'gathering together a parliament of carpenters' that bound themselves not to observe a certain ordinance 'touching their craft and their daily wages,'[14] and in 1339 a group of carpenters made a confederacy among men of their trade which 'in-

timidated men from taking work for less than 6d a day and an after-dinner drink.'[15] In 1303-4 Geoffrey de Nottingham was accused of agreeing to 'a confederacy of journeyman skinners, and of paying money into their box,'[16] and again in 1368 three skinners were charged with forming 'congregations, unions and covins in taverns or other places.'[17] It seems probable that these early associations of skinners, which evidently were sufficiently organised to have their own treasury, were closely related to the Fraternity of Our Lady's Assumption, which 'certainly was in existence as far back as 1398,' and which in 1402 is referred to as the 'yemen companye' of skinners. As such it existed through the 15th century in an uneasy though semi-formal relationship with the powerful master fraternity.[18] After 1348 there is a considerable increase in this kind of journeyman activity, at least as far as it is recorded in the *Calendars*. In 1349 some master-cordwainers complained that their servants entered a conspiracy 'not to serve them except by day and on their own terms,' with the rebels admitting that their number exceeded sixty, and a confederacy of bakers would not work for their masters 'except at double or treble the wages formerly given.'[19] From this time there are a further eight complaints of such journeymen confederacies, up to the 1384 reference to the journeymen armourers led by the interestingly named John Hood and John Shirewood; this series of complaints features the crafts of the brewers, Flemish weavers, cordwainers, goldsmiths, spurriers, and mercers, as well as the armourers.[20]

Although all these references are to the activities of London journeymen, there is evidence to suggest that there were attempts to form similar associations in other English towns. For example, at the turn of the 15th century the masters of the gild of cordwainers at York moved to suppress the illegal congregations of large numbers of their serving-men.[21] In Coventry, as well, patents were obtained by the town rulers prohibiting such confederacies, which nevertheless did not prevent the 1424 strike of the journeymen weavers seeking better wages and conditions.[22] There is also evidence from Coventry, as the editor of that town's *Leet-Book* points out, that the supposedly religious Gild of the Nativity, licensed there in 1384, whose membership was composed of 'labourers, inferior artificers and strangers,' was in fact founded 'to resist the mayor and other officials, and not for the welfare of souls.' This gild, which was suppressed, is directly linked to the journeyman Gild of the Nativity of fullers and tailors of 1439, and associated with the fraternities of S. Anne and S. George which appeared there in 1406, 1414 and 1425.[23] It would seem that religious fraternities could sometimes provide a legal means of association for groups that would otherwise not be able to meet as a class. For example, the famous Corpus Christi Gild of St. Michael on the Hill, formed in Lincoln in 1350, asserted in its ordinances that its members were men and women 'of the rank of common and middling folks,' and that 'no one of the rank of mayor or bailiff shall become a brother of the gild, unless he is found to be of humble, good, and honest conversation' and is accepted by all the members, even then not being allowed to hold any office within the gild.[24] It would seem clear, then, that fraternities of some kind, whether legal or illegal, were providing journeymen with the collective power necessary to produce effective action on the economic front, or at least, enough action to cause

concern to their masters.

As well as operating economically, yeoman fraternities were active in the political domain. As has been suggested, much of the historical research carried out on gilds has been concerned with the relations of the gilds to town authorities, whose instability was frequently reflected in turbulent power struggles at mayoral elections. The conception of the gilds as unified, unproblematic entities has led to an over-simplification of the nature of these problems. For example, Colin Platt, discussing the 'tone of class hatred' that emerged in late 13th century Lincoln over the question of mayoral powers, suggests a possible association of the appearance of the Corups Christi Gild with the suppression of craft gilds in the major cloth-working centres of England.[25] Yet in Lincoln gilds of the fullers and tailors, as well as the tylers, had all been founded well before Corpus Christi,[26] suggesting that this gild was drawing for its membership on a different class from that represented by the craft gilds. Certainly it is difficult to determine exactly what interests were benefiting from manipulation of the unrest of the commonalty, but if we are to understand how that commonalty itself perceived its actions it would be a mistake to regard the craft movement as an undivided one.

At the elections for the mayor in London in 1384, 'certain persons of the middle sort belonging to divers misteries. . . being banded together in great congregation and assembled in Guildhall, made a great clamour and outcry.' At the direction of the mayor, the masters of these misteries rounded up the rioters, dominated by the tailors, and presented them to the mayoral court.[27] The conjunction of mayor and masters in political power revealed in this episode seems to have been recognised by journeymen of the time, as evidenced by the cordwainers who in 1365 were charged with rebelling against the masters of their mistery, and who threatened that as soon as the present Mayor was out of office they would have redress for the wrongs they had suffered.'[28] Attempts at broadening or closing down the electorate for the office of mayor, so defining which class had control of the office, lay at the heart of all the riots at mayoral elections, and obviously they were seen by journeymen as an opportunity for some legitimate mechanism of power in determining their own working conditions. It is difficult now to distinguish the journeyman activity from the general craft movement to power revealed in the many riots at mayoral elections throughout England, but there can be little doubt that the journeymen themselves did not perceive their interests as identical with those of their masters.

Perhaps the best evidence as to how they did, in fact, perceive their interests, appears in the poems tacked to a church door during rebellious actions led by Laurence Saunders in Coventry, where we have already seen the suppression of journeyman gilds, late in the 15th century. Saunders himself was a wealthy dyer, and seems to have belonged to both the gild-merchant and the dyers' gild, but he was seen to "speak for the right" of the commonalty:

> The cyte is bond that shuld be fre.
> The right is holden fro the Cominalte
> And he that speketh for our right is in the hall,

And that is shame for yewe and for vs all.
You cannot denygh hit but he is your brother;
& to bothe Gildes he hath paid as moch as another.
They that woll be brother to the Gildes or therto pay,
We have no more to lese, the soth for to say.
ffor eny fauour or ffrenship the comiens with yowe fynde
But pyke awey our thryfte and make vs all blynde. . .
We may speke feire and bid you good morowe,
but luff with our hertes shall ye have non.
Cherish the Cominalte and se they haue their right
ffor drede of a worse chaunce by day or be nyght. . .
Be it knowen and vnderstand
This Cite shuld be free and nowe is bonde,
Dame good Eve made it free,
& is nowe the custome for woll and the draperie,
also hit is made that no prentes shall be
But xiij penyes pay shuld he.
that act did Robet Grene,
therefore he had many a Curse, I wene.
And nowe a nother rule ye do make
that non shall ryde at Lammas but they that ye take.
When our ale is Tunned
ye shall haue drynk to your Cake.
Ye have put on man like a Scot to raunsome.
that wolbe remembered when ye have all forgoten
Caviat.

It is clear from these poems that the gilds were seen as restrictive enclaves of oppressive power, and that the commons conceived of collective action on its own part as a threat, and indeed a violent assault upon that power, reflected in the reputed words of Saunders that 'we shall never have oure ryght till we have striken of the hedes of ii or iij of these Churles hedes that rule us; and yf thereafter hit be asked who did that dede hit shalbe said me and they and they and me.'[29]

Part of the complaint of these poems is the restriction of assembly at a religious festival—"non shall ryde at Lammas but they that ye take." But festivals, like religious gilds, provided one of the few legal occasions for public congregations of the commonalty, and could become the occasion for rebellious actions. So, for example, at about the same time as the events in Coventry, the Mayor of Walsall ordered the town's inhabitants not to 'assemble together out of their said town' for the Trinity Sunday fair, in circumstances closely resembling those at Coventry. Nevertheless, one hundred townsmen did assemble riotously there, led by 'Robert Marchall . . . calling himself "Robyn Hood," ' threatening to strike down anyone coming from the town to stop them, and having previously threatened to destroy the town.[30] The difficulty of finding a legal place to meet led, according to a petition of 1390, to a widespread abuse of the forests:

Whereas artificers and labourers, that is to say, butchers, shoemakers, tailors, and other low persons, keep greyhounds and other dogs, and at times when good Christians on holy days are at church, hearing divine service, go hunting in parks,

> rabbit-runs, and warrens of lords and others, and destroy them
> entirely; and so they assemble at such times to hold dis-
> cussions, and make plots and conspiracies, to make insurrec-
> tions and disobedience to your majesty and laws, under colour
> of such manner of hunting.[31]

It is in precisely these terms that the *Patent Rolls*, in 1416 and 1417, describe
the activities of Robert Stafford, a chaplain from the town of Lyndefeld, and
'other evildoers of his retinue,' Stafford assuming 'the unusual name of
Frere Tuk' as his alias.[32]

The evidence discussed provides some idea of the extent of the yeomen
fraternal movement, but it does not give any indication of how such
fraternities were constituted, or how they were perceived by their members.
Naturally any records that come down to us are the writings of apologists
for the authorities, who were not, in general, interested in such questions,
but there are occasional entries that provide a more detailed picture of how
such a yeoman fraternity was run. For example, in the eventful year 1381,
Nicholas Symond was charged with having held a 'covin and confederacy'
of journeymen spurriers in St. Bartholomew's Church, Smithfield, 'and for
nine years before that in the garden called Hyginesgarden.' A notarised
document, suspected of containing 'unsatisfactory ordinances,' had
prudently been destroyed, but the charges contain quite specific details of
other ordinances. From these it is clear that the fraternity was fairly
formally organised, and indeed conceived as a legally binding institution—
a journeyman who worked for less than the ordained wage was summonsed
to the Consistory Court of the Bishop of London for perjury.

Most of the ordinances are closely modelled on existing establishment
gilds, whether of the master-craftsman or social variety, with a treasurer, a
common-box, weekly fees, fines in wax for non-attendance, orders to keep
good fellowship, and so on. Others simply reverse the values of the master-
gilds, so that, for example, 'only journeymen (*servientes*) should belong to
their society, but no person keeping house, unless he be sworn while he was
still a journeyman.' Similarly, there are regulations as to minimum wages,
and orders not to work for any master employing a stranger.[33] If this
example is typical,[34] the illegal fraternities simply adopted existing
structures to their own purposes, and in so doing attempted to give a
legalised, socially authoritative form to values that had little power in
society. As to the question of how the journeymen themselves perceived
their motives, there is again little enough evidence, but the words of William
de Writele, 'fruter,' accord with the events, and in fact sum them up quite
neatly: 'the fruiterers were all poor and captives on account of their own
simplicity and if they would act on his advice they would be rich and
powerful.'[35]

It is this kind of socially authoritative ideology, linked with a formalised
economic organisation, that is to be found in the ballad depiction of the
Robin Hood band, and which distinguishes that depiction (in part) from the
loose-knit, amorphous groupings and anti-social values that Geremek finds
in his study of medieval criminal society. The particular ideology of the
ballads is of course 'good yemenry.' Critics have likened yeomanry to

chivalry, arguing indeed that 'it is the same thing essentially,' and that Robin Hood's values are those, say, of a Gawain, 'but he belongs to a different order.'[36] But this is precisely the point. Chivalry is the expression of a class hegemony, it is intimately bound up with the power of the class that professes it. This is why when Chaucer's Miller adopts the chivalric mode it automatically becomes a parody—the implicit threat of someone 'belonging to a different order' and yet claiming the values of a 'higher order' must be disarmed by being made ludicrous. Yet there is no hint of parody in Robin Hood. Rather, the links between the literary ideologies of chivalry and yeomanry seem to bear a similar relation to those between the politico-economic ideologies of the master-gilds and their yeoman counterparts. Several of the values of chivalry are presented as naturally belonging to craftsmen, and if their appearance is examined more closely it can be seen that they have been adapted to a different social context, and united there with other values alien to the chivalric code.

In *Robin Hood and the Potter,* the yeoman Robin Hood is called both 'corteys and ffre,' concepts that certainly are derived in some way from chivalry. However, the issue in the ballad which explores the idea of 'cortesey' concerns the payment to Robin of 'on peney of pauage' for the right to pass through his forest with a cart of pots. The Potter and Robin fight, and Robin learns the lesson of 'good yemenry' that it is 'fol leytell cortesey' to demand the toll. Now it is against this type of 'custome', the toll for mercantile traffic to towns, that the poems of Coventry were bitterly complaining, seeing it as a restriction on the liberties of their city, the city that 'shuld be free & nowe is bonde'. The chivalric notion of courtesy has been brought to bear on an issue of relevance to the 'pore yeman' of the town, who demands courteous respect for his rights as a free economic agent. In doing so it encounters a new sense of the word 'ffre,' freedom of the town rather than freedom from villeinage, or chivalric largesse. It is this sense of the word that would be most meaningful to a town audience.

If in this episode elements of the chivalric code can be seen entering a new network of social associations, a new economy of values, they can also be seen to undergo structural changes to accommodate these values. So, for example, the joust, the contest by battle for truth that had entered so deeply into the medieval legal framework, is no longer a moral allegory for the heroic representation of chivalry. In fact the hero, Robin Hood, loses this fight, as he loses every fight other than with his political enemies the Sheriff and Sir Guy. To overcome the Potter, Robin requires the collective strength of his men, and in this the ballad follows the pattern for every such battle Robin undertakes. The result of the fight is that Robin and the Potter agree to a 'ffelischepe,' and it is as an exploration of this concept of fellowship, linked with courtesy, that the fights are structured. The craftsman proves himself the equal or the better of the figure of the master, who becomes his fellow, and is then confronted with the power of the greater fellowship, which he agrees to enter. It is a battle not of opposing moral values but of relative political strengths.

Here as in many places in the ballads the values of yeomanry and fellowship are closely bound up with each other, and indeed the band itself is sometimes called a 'felaushyp,' as in these stanzas from the *Gest:*

> 'Let belowe a horne,' sayd Robyn,
> 'That felaushyp may vs knowe,'
> Seuen score of wygt yeman
> Came pryckynge on a rowe.
> And euerych of them a good mantell
> Of scarlet and of raye. 229¹-230²

A fellowship of seven score yeomen with their own livery. Elements such as this, pointing to a more formally structured economic organisation than the typical outlaw gang, are not usually explored or developed more fully in the ballads themselves. They merely appear briefly at those points where a more precise image of the band than the simple 'seven score of wyght yemen' is required, as, for example, when a new member is recruited to the band. At such points the ballads naturally draw on those collective models present in society that are most closely related in the minds of the audience to the specific situation of the outlaw band and so, almost unconsciously, such features reveal the historical structures that underlie the poetry.

In *The Jolly Pinder of Wakefield*, a ballad, according to Child, 'pretty well sung to pieces before it ever was printed,' Robin and the Pinder sing the desires and discontents of the convenant serving-men in the following terms:

> 'O wilt thou forsake the pinder his craft,
> And go to the greenwood with me?
> Thou shalt have a livery twice in the year,
> The one green, the other brown shall be.'
> 'If Michaelmas day were once come and gone
> And my master had paid me my fee,
> Then would I set as little by him
> As my master doth set by me.' 12-13.

Receiving a livery or a fee for entering the outlaw band is given its fullest expression in the *Jolly Pinder*, but it is also a common, briefly mentioned feature of the *Gest, Robin Hood and the Curtal Friar, Robin Hood and Little John*, and *Robin Hood and the Tanner*. The lower orders of the gilds often received a livery free, in which case it usually consisted simply of a hood. There may be an element of this in the ballads, although the expressions used here seem mainly to be a memory of manorial usage, as indeed were the gilds' liveries themselves. Nevertheless the livery is in the ballads directly linked to a town craft context, and when it occurs with specific actions there can be little doubt as to its true significance.

When in the *Gest*, for example, the Sheriff is lured into the outlaw company, Robin dresses him in its livery and promises to 'teche' him 'all this twelve monthes' the craft of outlawry—the idea of training or apprenticeship upon entry into the bond is another common feature in the ballads mentioned.

The economic organisation of the forest band, when it becomes explicit, is that of a mastercraftsman's shop, as when, in the *Gest*, Robin sells his merchandise, his 'thyrty yerdes and thre' of green cloth, to the king, or when each of the yeomen supplies the knight with a different article of craft necessary for his journey. It is simply that in this case the journeymen have

been proved in combat the equal of their 'master', and that their somewhat unusual method of producing the goods has required them to set up a different liveried association than that of the legitimate craft gilds. Acceptance by this fellowship is restricted in a similar fashion to entry into the Lincoln Corpus Christi Gild—of the higher orders, only those 'that wol be a god felowe' shall not be attacked. Perhaps it is as the figure of patron saint of such a fraternity that Robin's strangely heterodox devotion to the Virgin Mary is best explained—a devotion which William Landland, for one, evidently found unconvincing when in his serious religious poem *Piers Plowman* he put 'rymes of Robyn Hode' in the mouth of Sloth (B-text, V. 402).

In spite of that orthodox hostility to the Robin Hood ballads, it is not necessary to assume that the outlaw band was perceived in a fully conscious manner as a yeoman fraternity by a medieval audience. As in the case of the actual fraternities, the ballads are drawing on the gilds (which provided the very structures by which this audience observed and conceived society and social power in action) for elements of imagery in the depiction of a coherently organised association of yeomen. To the extent that the ballads conceive such organisations as existing, and belonging naturally to the yeomen, that is a kind of ideological usurpation of power. But in fact and in fiction these organisations remained embryonic and disjointed. Yet that may itself indicate the *vital* character of the ballads, in both the lively and the urgent senses of the word.

In this paper I have attempted to trace out some of the associations of the word 'yeoman' in the medieval urban context, and to see in what form those associations reappear in the Robin Hood ballads. If these reappearing forms seem ambiguous or elusive it does not necessarily follow that they were a matter of indifference to their original audience, or that their ambiguity is any less precise or rich in significance than the more commonly analysed textual ambiguities. There are certain words and elements in fictional narratives that derive directly from the social formation in which those narratives occur. Such elements are rarely overtly explored or developed within the narrative itself, which is generally concerned with concepts that have undergone further mediation (indeed it may well be that it is a function of the fictional process to conceal these direct links by transformation into conventional narrative structures). For this reason such elements are usually disregarded by literary critics examining the narrative as a thing-in-itself, isolated from the historical conditions of its production. Yet these elements are the roots that embed a narrative in its particular social formation. The network of their associations may extend within the historical consciousness of the narrative's audience rather than within the narrative itself, but it is none the less present or relevant to an understanding of the narrative for that.

Broadly speaking, it seems that there were two somewhat contradictory images of collective action available to the class of urban serving-men seeking wealth and power—that of the fringe-dwelling criminal gang, and that of the suppressed journeyman gild. Elements of both these images are united in the Robin Hood band—to borrow a model from Freud's analysis of dreams, the two social images have undergone a process of condensation, so

that the poetic image of the band has become overdetermined. As such it does not cancel out the contradictions of its associations but is the medium for their fullest and most concise expression. It brings together two dialectic aspects of historical changes. One is the chain of associations linked with the rupture of conventional structural ties—the anti-social values of the criminal gang, drawn from a newly-formed mass of urban marginals, who nevertheless require some form or collective society for their own protection. The other is the chain of associations linked with the formation of a new social structure—the yeoman fraternity which bears an ideology adopted from established society, but which is nevertheless illegal.

The economic conditions of existence of this medieval urban class might today be seen as essentially those of capitalism—as wage-workers separated from their means of production.[37] To that class itself, of course, it would not be seen in such terms. Rather, a gap has opened up between their actual lives and the dominant ideological forms present in their society, which no longer account adequately for those lives. The array of associations that derive from the Robin Hood band and are constituted in the Robin Hood ballads form a network of paths traced across this gap, with the band itself a realisation of the rupture in social organisation initiated by the development of the journeyman fraternities.

Notes

1   B. Geremek, *Les marginaux Parisiens aux XIV ^{e} et XV ^{e} siècles,* Paris, 1976, p. 275. ('The late Middle Ages are characterised by a very accelerated dynamic of changes in social payments. . . By the 14th and 15th centuries there was completed in France, as in the majority of other European countries, an alteration in the long-term tendencies of economic development. With this alteration are associated a process of weakening of certain social ties and of strengthening of certain others: our attention here is directed to structural problems.').

2   R.H. Hilton (ed.), *Peasants, knights and heretics,* Cambridge, 1976, collects all the papers of the debate, by Hilton, Holt, Keen and Aston, which originally appeared in *Past and present.*

3   F.J. Child, *The English and Scottish popular ballads,* London, 1888.

4   G. Unwin, *The gilds and companies of London,* London, 1963, p. 244

5   B. Putnam, *The enforcement of the statute of labourers,* 1908.

6   *Rotuli parliamentorum, vol. 2,* pp. 312, 340; *vol. 3,* p. 46.

7   *Rot. Parl., vol. 5,* p. 16.

8   Geremek, *Les marginaux.*

9   Geremek, *Les Marginaux.* p. 285.

10   Unwin, *Gilds and companies,* pp. 244-5

11   L. Brentano, introduction to T. and L.T. Smith, *English gilds,* Oxford, 1870, pp. xlvi-xlvii.

12   e.g. the work of Brentano and Toulmin Smith just cited.

13   See S. Thrupp's account of gilds in the *Cambridge economic history of Europe, vol. III,* Cambridge, 1965, and the change of emphasis in her paper in the *Fontana economic history of Europe, vol. I,* London 1972.

14   *Calendar of Early Mayors' Courts Rolls,* 1298-1307, p. 25.

15   *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls, 1323-64,* p. 108.

16   *Cal. Early Mayors, 1298-1307,* p. 154.

17   *Cal. Plea. Mem., 1364-81,* pp. 88-9

18   J.J. Lambert, *Records of the skinners of London,* London, 1933, pp. 74-5.

19   *Cal. Plea Mem., 1323-64,* pp. 225, 231-2.

20   *Cal. Plea Mem., 1323-64* pp. 235, 284; *1364-81,* pp. 22, 65-6, 237, 291-4; *1381-1412,* pp. 59, 63.

21   R.H. Skaife (ed.), *York Memorandum Book,* Surtees Society, vol. 57, p. 191.

22   M. Dormer-Harris (ed.), *Coventry Leet-Book,* E.E.T.S. 135-8, pp. xxxii-iii.

23   *Coventry Leet-Book,* p. xxxiii.

24   Toulmin Smith, *English gilds,* pp 178-9

25   Colin Platt, *The English medieval town,* London, 1976, pp. 112-8.

26   Toulmin Smith, *English gilds,* pp. 179-85.

27   *Cal. Plea Mem., 1381-1412,* pp. 62-3.

28   *Cal. Plea Mem., 1364-81,* p. 22.

29   *Coventry Leet-Book,* pp. 556-567.

30   *Staffordshire suits in the Court of the Star Chamber*
     (Staffordshire Historical Collection, vol. X, Pt. 1, 1907), p.
     81.

31   *Rot. Parl. vol. 3*, p. 273.

32   *Patent Rolls, 1416-22*, p. 84.

33   *Cal. Plea Mem., 1364-81*, pp. 291-4.

34   This is not to imply that every association instanced was
     organised as completely as this one, but rather that,
     insofar as journeymen conceived of an organised group,
     it was along these lines. It is important to stress that
     what is being discussed here is, strictly speaking,
     ideological rather than economic history—that is, as
     Althusser puts it, "the imaginary relationship of in-
     dividuals to their real conditions of existence." (*Lenin
     and Philosophy*, London, 1977, p. 153)

35   *Cal. Early Mayors., 1298-1307*, pp. 157-8.

36   Holt, in Hilton, (ed.), *Peasants, knights and heretics*, p.
     237.

37   It has been argued that it would nevertheless be
     inaccurate to theorise such small cells as capitalist when
     they are within a dominant economic formation of a
     different order—see B. Hindess and P. Hirst, *Pre-
     Capitalist modes of production*, London, 1975, esp. chs. 5
     and 6.