

Ridley Scott's Robin Hood: an outlaw hero that even the rich can love

Kevin Kearney
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The story of Robin Hood is one of the most beloved myths in the English-speaking cultural tradition. A figure symbolizing resistance to the false authority of wealth and privilege and the communal solidarity of the exploited, he has been transmitted to us from medieval England in countless books, plays and film.

This process has naturally wrought numerous changes on the tale for better or worse, depending on the social, economic and ideological pressures of the times. Yet, the tale persists in popular consciousness to the extent that it captures some essential truths about society, law and the class nature of morality itself.

In their new version of the legend, *Robin Hood*, Ridley Scott and screenwriter Brian Koppelman happily eviscerate all of the character's essential content, leaving a dry husk filled with their own nasty concoction. To summarize, they revise the story to add a chapter in the life of Robin Hood which precedes the great story we all know and love, or in Hollywood-speak: they have made a "prequel".

This new chapter presents a very unheroic, brooding Robin (Russell Crowe) who is not really an outlaw at all, but ultimately a great patriot who aids a corrupt and ruthless king to unite the country—exploiters and exploited alike—against a demonic and ever-present foreign enemy, France. Another new addition: Robin Hood and his merry men initially meet and band together as mercenaries slaughtering Muslims in the Crusades!

Although Scott's Robin Hood expresses some limited regret for having carried out the king's orders to kill innocent Muslim women and children—only after being forced by the monarch to give an honest opinion about the Crusades—it doesn't seem to have affected him too deeply, and the merry men, even less so. The latter are reincarnated as a pack of artless frat boys who love drinking and chasing the ladies.

Needless to say, one is not obliged here to plumb the depths of the ideological pressures expressed in this absurdity of a film. They largely speak for themselves, and what they say is not flattering to Scott or Koppelman (*The Green Zone*, *Mystic River*, etc.). Instead, let's look at what has been trampled on. What is it

that is so special and enduring about the tale of Robin Hood that makes one recoil from Ridley Scott's revision of the old tradition? Is it mere sentiment or is there something deeper?

"In *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*," Stephen Knight carefully documents the different manifestations of Robin Hood over the centuries. He notes that Robin Hood began as a shadowy forest fugitive in the 12th and 13th centuries, a rebellious but still somewhat innocuous and mysterious figure. Yet, the story's popularity increased and its elements of resistance to false authority and community solidarity became more defined from the 14th century onward in ballads and plays.

Knight notes as well that the frequency of Robin Hood plays steadily increased in the 1500s paralleled by an ever-greater official concern. In this period the plays and other popular festivities began to be considered subversive, associated with popular riots and banned in many instances. They were largely extinguished in the period preceding the English civil war in the mid-17th century.

But the tale of Robin wasn't merely spun whole cloth from the popular imagination. It had definite roots in socioeconomic conflicts in late medieval England. This period in England was closely analyzed by Karl Marx in *Capital* as a case study in what he dubbed the "primitive accumulation of capital," or the prehistory of capitalism. "This primitive accumulation plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in theology," according to Marx.

From an socioeconomic standpoint this was the period when the feudal order—in which the peasant was attached to an overlord, owned his own small tools and some parcel of land that had been passed on to offspring as a matter of right for several hundred years—underwent a transformation. In the old society's womb a new social order emerged, in which feudal bonds were broken, the peasant-laborer was stripped of his individual tools, land and obligations to a lord and thrust into larger capitalist enterprises where labor became a social process, carried out with industrial-size tools owned by the private entrepreneur.

This was a brutal process experienced by masses of people in late medieval England, the period in which Robin Hood first

became so popular. Marx noted the two sides of this epoch: “The historical movement which changes the producers into wage-workers, appears, on the one hand, as their emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds, and this side alone exists for our bourgeois historians. But, on the other hand, these new freedmen became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and of all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And the history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.”

In this period masses of people were ejected from their land eventually to become city dwellers, vagabonds, and highwaymen—about whom many a heroic tale has been told very much in keeping with the tradition of Robin Hood. This process was accompanied by the empowering of law enforcement to incarcerate, torture and execute those who resisted and by laws keeping wages low and hours long and preventing the formation of labor organizations. The period is also associated with the destruction of the “commons” or that area of the country hitherto left to nature and shared by all members of the kingdom in common. These tracts of virgin forest were the obvious basis for the “green wood” referred to in the Robin Hood tales as the stomping grounds of Robin and his merry men.

Robin Hood is special in that he was perhaps the first and archetypal form of what became a cultural tradition of celebrating the wrongfully persecuted, class-conscious outlaw that carried on until the late 1800s, eventually taking root in the English colonies of America and Australia. The righteous aura of a “Robin Hood” came to attach itself to living men such as Ned Kelly in Australia and the still controversial figure of Joaquin Murrieta in California, to name only a few. The latter is widely considered the inspiration for the fictional character “Zorro” in Johnston McCulley’s story, “The Curse of Capistrano” (1919).

In the end, Robin Hood and all the noble outlaw tales that followed have become cherished cultural relics that predate and in some ways anticipate the modern struggle against the authority and exploitation of the capitalist ruling class. They are a small artistic reflection of a previous chapter in the flesh and blood struggle for emancipation from exploitation that has persisted throughout the history of class society and continues today.

This—not sentiment or conventionality—is why Scott’s revisionist film is so very distasteful and uninteresting, especially in the present period.

No one is castigating Scott or his screen writers for experimentation in film, art and story telling. That’s not what Scott is doing here. He is not creatively looking for a deeper truth in Robin Hood that may help a new generation better understand the past or the present period. On the most elemental level, the film is simply not entertaining. It has a polished quality to it, attributable to the massive budget at the disposal of such a filmmaker, but it is long (140 minutes) and tedious. The writing is

terrible, the character development is about as detailed and nuanced as that in the average action film and those brief moments when Robin Hood expresses some political sentiment are as predictable as a radio talk-show host rant, but so much tamer.

The man who brought us *Alien* and the science fiction masterpiece *Blade Runner* is not present. This is not serious art or history. Ridley Scott is neutering Robin Hood and turning him into his opposite. Nor is this an isolated incident. Over the last decade or so the filmmaker seems to be developing his own lame brand of cinematic historical falsification. The film seems to be trying to speak to the discontent of the “average Joe” in the language of Hollywood-style history and quasi-right-wing populism, much in the same fashion that *Gladiator*—another film directed by Ridley Scott starring Russell Crowe—attempted to do.

Both *Gladiator* and *Robin Hood* have the same tendency to transport the viewer and his or her feelings of confused angst to a highly distorted bygone era—accurate primarily in costume, the names of people, places and things—so as to encourage the idea that what he or she is suffering is nothing new, nothing much has changed in a millennium or two, and nothing ever will. Through Roman times, to medieval England and down to the present the rugged individual has always had to stoically endure exploitation and abuse while surrounded by fools and cowards (until he explodes in violence).

The moral: if one keeps his or her head, endures his or her plight with some grace and stays faithful to the empire ... king ... national government there will be a happy outcome. In sum: a good deal of conformist rubbish.

Three cheers for the brave artists who have stayed true to the essence of Robin Hood through the ages! Down with this version!



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