

# A Hero for all Seasons or, Signs of the Times: Robin Hood from Republican to Restoration England

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"You say you want a revolution  
Well, you know,  
We all want to change the world.

You tell me that it's evolution  
Well, you know,  
We all want to change the world.

But when you talk about destruction  
Don't you know that you can count me out

Don't you know it's gonna be  
Alright  
Alright  
Alright. (...)"

The Beatles, "Revolution" (1968).

"**R**evolution", "Citizenship", "Nation" ... who dares define them? How do they interact? How have they been codified since, say, the early modern period? For what purposes? Irrespective of the answers each of us may provide and the meaning(s) one may attach to these keywords, both as theoretical concepts and sociopolitical facts (an aim far beyond the scope, space and length of this paper, but see, for instance, Williams, 1988), it can hardly be denied that, after the creation of the Tudor State, the 17<sup>th</sup> century played no small part in the (re)shaping of "revolution", "citizenship" and "nation". In fact, as the century unfolded, the political, ideological and religious struggle to define the boundaries between State and citizen, king and subject, crown and country, made it increasingly clear that, as far as everyone's rights, liberties and duties were concerned, a State larger than the Crown and a nation

likewise wider than Parliament were not exactly synonymous, if at all.

Having said that, my purpose is neither to discuss the concepts of “revolution”, “citizenship” and “nation” as such nor how they were translated into (and ultimately redefined by) the political turmoil of mid seventeenth-century England. What I will try to do then is simply to suggest how in the early 1660s second-class literature and first-rate propaganda have joined forces offering through the Robin Hood legend an apology for the need to replace revolution with restoration, thus healing a nation deeply divided in the previous decades.

The bibliography available on Robin Hood<sup>1</sup> makes it clear that the Tudor period did carry out a consistent recycling of a ‘politically incorrect’ medieval outlaw; whether this was done intentionally or not is debatable, but the fact of the matter is that Robin’s admission to courtly circles and his appropriation by courtly culture somehow managed to reduce the hero’s partly subversive nature. By the time the civil wars broke out, some features of the original portrait as we know it had been discarded and duly replaced: Robin was socially promoted (from yeoman into an earl, albeit a dispossessed one ...) and morally rehabilitated, from an occasionally sympathetic and generous thief into a social bandit and noble robber (Hobsbawm, 1985). Likewise, the allusions in the *Gest* to a king Edward, apparently placing Robin in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, had given way to a more or less widespread and still widely-held belief that Robin’s contemporary monarch was Richard I (1189-1199), who of all people was fast becoming part of the English national heritage culture.

In spite of Robin’s continuing popularity through plays, poems, chronicles, broadside ballads and folklore, the 1640s and the 1650s bear evidence to a decline in his literary fortune which may perhaps be ascribed(able) to the period’s unrest, stormed by unstable compromises and fragile alliances; in fact, if the angry forties witness the outburst of the tensions building up between king and Parliament since James I’s reign (1603-1625), if not earlier, the 1650s would be dominated by a republican

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Holt, 1984, Dobson and Taylor (eds.), 1989 and Knight, 1994.

dictatorship institutionally and constitutionally moulded on a Cromwell to some extent held hostage by the regime he himself had helped to create.<sup>2</sup>

Any attempt to pinpoint the reasons for Robin’s partial oblivion during the republican interlude must also take into account the closing of the theatres declared by the *Long Parliament* in September 2nd, 1642,<sup>3</sup> which would only be revoked by the Restoration (1660). This does not mean to say that for eighteen long years all theatrical activities did cease completely; still, the reduction in the volume of plays is all too apparent (Harbage (ed.), 1964: 142-154). After 1649, a similar fate would fall upon the ballads,<sup>4</sup> notwithstanding the clandestine prosecution of ballad writing.<sup>5</sup>

A recurring feature in Robin’s political image certainly lies in his ambiguous behaviour towards the established social and political order, swinging between open hostility and the lip-service paid to a highly idiosyncratic notion of loyalty; suffice it to mention the coexistence in the

<sup>2</sup> In Morrill’s words, “he (Cromwell) was at once the only source of stability and the ultimate source of instability of the regimes he ran.” (Morrill in Morgan (ed.), 1989: 329).

<sup>3</sup> “Whereas [...] the distracted estate of England, threatened with a cloud of blood by a civil war, call for all possible means to appease and avert the wrath of God [...]; among which fasting and prayer having been often tried to be very effectual, have been lately and are still enjoined; and whereas public sports do not well agree with public calamities, nor public stage plays with the seasons of humiliation, [...] being spectacles of pleasure, too commonly expressing lascivious mirth and levity; it is therefore thought fit and ordained by the Lords and Commons in this Parliament assembled that, while these sad causes and set times of humiliation do continue, public stage plays shall cease and be forborn; [...]” (*apud* Hughes (ed.), 1988: I, 80-81).

<sup>4</sup> “Only with the legal prohibition of ballad-singing under the Commonwealth can the first and golden age of the English broadside ballad be said to have come to a close.” (Dobson e Taylor (eds.), 1989: 47).

<sup>5</sup> “Despite many attempts to suppress them, the street ballads retained their popularity and positively flourished in the seventeenth century, even when Cromwellian and then Restoration censorship meant that politically unacceptable ballads had to settle for an illegal existence.” (Bold, 1979: 70-71).

old ballads of a reverence clearly and constantly professed to the king and the depredations inflicted upon his beloved deer ... By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this (con)tradi(c)tion had not died out completely as Underdown highlights: "There were long traditions behind the foresters' forcible defence of common rights: in Dean the name 'Robin Hoods' had been applied to participants in a 1612 outbreak. But the Dean men had a strong sense of legitimacy, and when they burned timber that the Earl of Pembroke had unjustly cut, they did so to shouts of 'God Save the King!'" (Underdown, 1987: 110). Robin's pseudonymic survival as someone politically troublesome or somehow menacing reappears in a list of MP candidates to the 1640 general election headed by 'Robin Hood' (*ibidem*: 135). Closer to the period we will be focusing on, Underdown recalls: "A reveller at Whitestaunton in 1659 assaulted one of the watchmen and identified himself as Robin Hood before he was taken, still struggling, to the tithingman." (*ibidem*: 270). Cromwell I had already passed away (September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1658) and the lack of military support to Cromwell II, causing him to abdicate in May 1659, was soon to lead to the Stuart Restoration (Charles II, 1660-1685).<sup>6</sup>

At this stage, it might be interesting to consider what do restorations involve, because the alleged desirability of a return to an earlier *status quo* ('back to the future', so to speak) makes it notoriously difficult to distinguish or draw the line between backward steps and forward moves

<sup>6</sup> Holt draws our attention to a curious example of Robin's political vitality: "Peck [Francis Peck, a Stamford antiquary] interpreted a version of *Robin Hood and the Scotchman*, which he included in his collection [1735], as a Cavalier song, sung after the battle of Worcester of 1651, in which Robin Hood stood for Charles II and the Scotchman for the Scottish general, David Leslie. In yet another gloss on the ballad tradition Peck equated Richard I with Charles II, Saladin with Oliver Cromwell, the king's daughter with the realm of England, 'and what if by Robin Whood ... he meant the Concern which every good man naturally feels stir in him for his distressed Country, when it is in a state of Slavery, as England was, in the Usurpate of Oliver Cromwell?'" (Holt, 1984: 183). *Robin Hood and the Scotchman* holds number 130 in Child (ed.), 1965: III, 150-151.

... Anyway, the transitional countdown from post-Cromwellian republic to Stuart monarchy takes place in an atmosphere of political negotiation between General Monck, the Convention Parliament, nominated in 1660 with a view to ratifying Charles' return from the Low Countries, the prince himself and Edward Hyde (1609-1674), the future earl of Clarendon and Chancellor. The main purpose was to ensure that the transition would be a peaceful one, thereby putting an end to the political, ideological and religious sectarianism that had ravaged Britain in the previous decades. Charles' reign would provide many telling examples of the uselessness or naivety behind this attempt to overcome or reconcile all the quarrelling passions set loose in the recent past, leaving a trail of still smouldering ashes in the cauldron of the nation's memory, notwithstanding the good intentions paving the words of the royal Declaration of Breda (April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1660), firstly addressed to Parliament and given out to the British public at large on May 1<sup>st</sup>:

[...] to the end that the fear of punishment may not engage any [...] to a perseverance in guilt [...] we do [...] declare, that we do grant a full and general pardon [...] to all our subjects, of what degree and quality soever, who within forty days after the publishing hereof shall lay hold upon this our grace and favour, and shall by any public act declare their doing so, and that they return to the loyalty and obedience of good subjects [...]. [...] let all our loving subjects, how faulty soever, rely upon the word of a king [...] that no crime whatsoever committed against us or our royal father before the publication of this shall ever rise in judgement or be brought in question against any of them, [...] we desiring and ordaining that henceforward all notes of discord, separation and difference of parties be utterly abolished among all our subjects, whom we invite and conjure to a perfect union among themselves, under our protection [...]. (*apud* Hughes (ed.), 1988: I, 249).

The influence of this conciliatory disposition on the outlaw's profile is clearly, if rather primarily, translated in *Robin Hood and His*

*Crew of Souldiers*, an anonymous comedy performed in Nottingham on April 23rd, 1661, Charles II's coronation day.<sup>7</sup> Apart from the date's overtly political meaning and the outlaw's legendary connections with the city "Queen of the Midlands", the choice of Nottingham itself is anything but a sheer coincidence, considering that on August 20th, 1642, the town had witnessed the rise of the royal standard by Charles I, a gesture seen as the official opening ceremony of the civil wars (Morgan (ed.), 1989: 317). Both politically and symbolically, the staging of *Robin Hood and His Crew of Souldiers* in Nottingham would therefore signal/seal the end of an unfortunate cycle in the nation's recent history and the return to a newly restored old political order. Moreover, the play might also be read as a homage to a town that had remained loyal to the king throughout the wars (Dobson e Taylor (eds.), 1989: 237), unlike the garrisons stationed in the castle, "[...] a Roundhead island in a hostile sea of Royalists." (Bryson, 1983: 52).

In the play, the haunting memory of the last two decades is embodied in Robin's presentation as the commander of a group of soldiers; this conversion of medieval outlaws into republican rebels is made credible by a common withdrawal to the woods and resort to such criminal practices as robbery and violence. The soldiers' estrangement from 'straight' civil society accounts plausibly for their ignorance of the Restoration, of which they are informed by a messenger sent by the local sheriff<sup>8</sup> with the aim of persuading the rebels to surrender themselves and their weapons and declare their "loyalty and obedience" as might be expected from all

<sup>7</sup> The version used here is the one transcribed in Dobson e Taylor (eds.), 1989: 237-242, hereafter identified by the page numbers only. Harbage mentions the play, although he fails to name the company responsible for its production and performance (Harbage (ed.), 1964: 156-157).

<sup>8</sup> Although the play fails to identify his shrievalty, the choice of a Nottingham stage suggests that he would indeed be the sheriff of Nottingham; likewise, the "neighb'ring woods" and "the whole Forrest" mentioned in Robin's first speech may be read as allusions to Sherwood (238).

the "good" and "loving subjects" targeted in the Declaration of Breda; among the strategies pursued in the play, pride of place must inevitably lie with the messenger's last speech, where Charles is portrayed as a king endowed with superlative qualities (240-241)<sup>9</sup> and the Restoration as the outcome of divine justice.

The soldiers' reaction, particularly Little John's, is a curious one. To start with, their condition as non-citizens would justify at the most a willing suspension of disbelief in the royal pardon; John, for instance, promptly warns his fellow companions that "Gives and Fetters, Hatchets and Halters, stincking prisons, and the death of dogs is all we can expect." (238). In his view, the sheriff's purpose is "[...] to reduce us to loyalty, and the miseries of an honest life; [...]" (*ibidem*) and the full reading of the royal proposals fails to make John change his independent mind. John's reaction is strengthened both by his hope that "[...] our worthy Master will not credit the gingling words of pardon, and acts of grace, and sully all his former glories with a surviving repentance; [...]" (239) and his belief that submission and loyalty are hardly attractive to men "[...] who know the sweets of theft and rogerly [sic], to whom dangers are as pleasant as dried suckets, who have been nurs'd and fed fat with blood and slaughter [...]" (*ibidem*). John's indomitable spirit is perhaps best expressed in his truly revolutionary articles of faith which, according to Knight (Knight, 1994: 145-146), make him sound like a Leveller:

Every brave soule is born a King; [...] courage and lofty thoughts are not ever confin'd to Thrones, nor still th' appendages of an illustrious birth, but the thatcht Hovell or the simple Wood oft times turns forth a mind as fully fraught with Gallantry and true worth as doth the marble Pallace; [...]. (*ibidem*).

<sup>9</sup> Suffice it to mention Charles' portrayal as "[...] One who hath suffer'd injuries beyond example, yet of such an unparalleled charity, he pardons them beyond hope." (241).

Although it is John who most forcefully discards the proposals conveyed by the sheriff's messenger, William too rejects the idea of exchanging the natural forest for the civilized court,<sup>10</sup> thus adding fuel to John's volatile notion of "citizenship". As to Robin, his agreement with John and William comes out in the hero's first long speech: "[...] we have Swords, and Arms, and Lives equally engaged in our past account, and whilst these Armes can wield our Swords, or our uncurd'd blood give vigor to those Arms, hopes of submission are as vain as is the strange request." (240). Instead of the speedy declarations of loyalty the ballad tradition would warrant for or lead us to expect, these quotations make up a passionate and unequivocal rejection of courtly values, manners and practices, favouring the free independence of forest life, however bereft of the benefits of official "citizenship" as a boon granted from above by the powers that be.

All things considered, it is hardly surprising that Robin's sudden and unconvincing repentance,<sup>11</sup> which only the need to endorse the letter,

<sup>10</sup> "If this geare takes then we may turn our Bows into Fiddle-sticks, or strangle ourselves in the strings, for the daies of warre and wantonness will be done. Now must I whimper like a breecht School-boy, and make a face as soure as an Apes when he eates Crabs; and then learn manners, and to make legs with the patience of a setting-dog; and cry, I forsooth, and no forsooth, like a Country wench at a Churching; Wakes and Bear-baitings, and a little Cudgel-play must be all our comfort, and then in some smoaky corner recount our past adventures, whilst the good wives blesse themselves [...]. We must not dream of Venison, but be content like the King's liege-people with crust and mouldy Cheese." (*ibidem*).

<sup>11</sup> "Ha! whence is this sudden change? That resolution which but now was remo[r]seless as a Rock of Diamonds, and unyielding as the hardned Steel, is now soft and flexible as a weak womans passions. I am quite another man; thaw'd into conscience of my Crime and Duty; melted into loyalty and respect to vertue. What an harsh savage beast I was before, not differing from the fiery Lyon or the cruell Bear, but in my knowledge to doe greater ill, my strength and eager rashness was all my boast. [...] sure some power great and uncommon hath quite transform'd me, and consum'd all that was bad and vicious in me." (241).

as well as the spirit, of the Declaration of Breda can justify or indeed explain, is itself undermined by the Miltonian overtones in the rebels' characterization; in other words, verisimilitude and textual coherence are mercilessly overridden by the king's mercy, as the "forgive and forget" philosophy behind the Declaration is forced down upon the play by a *deus ex machina*: the anonymous author or his invisible narrator. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, in its efforts to assert itself, power may resort, if need be, to such rethorical weapons as tolerance, persuasion and forgiveness.

The clearly propagandist nature and aims of *Robin Hood and His Crew of Souldiers* surely lie at the heart of Underdown's remark:

Élite manipulation of popular symbols could be [...] undisguised, especially in the years immediately after the Restoration, when the importance of loyalty to the crown needed to be constantly reiterated. Robin Hood, for centuries a symbol of popular independence and resistance to authority, was quickly pressed into service. (Underdown, 1987: 282)

Ideologically speaking, the play does, in fact, illustrate the perennial appeal and flexibility of the Robin Hood legend, able to adapt itself at different times to different circumstances for different purposes.

Notwithstanding the hero's appropriation by/surrender to the political order consequent upon the Restoration, J. C. Holt recalls:

When in the 1660s William Winstanley produced *Poor Robin's Almanac* to compete with the officially licensed version of the Stationers' Company, he lightened dull chronology by including a list of villains' days along with the usual festivals. He drew up a 'Fanatic's Chronology', which began with Cain's murder of Abel and ended with the execution of the Regicides, and a 'Roundheads or Fanatic's Kalendar, with the names of their chief Ringleaders, most eminent for Villany'. There Robin, Little John and Friar Tuck figure among the villains [...]. (Holt, 1984: 182).

Apparently, in spite of the Declaration of Breda, Restoration England was still finding it difficult both to forgive and to forget ... In Lytton's words, just over two centuries later, "revolutions are not made with rose-water."<sup>12</sup> As if restorations could be.

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Parisians* (1873), Book V, chap. vii *apud* J. M. and M. J. Cohen (eds.), 1981: 240, n.º. 12.

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