For anyone who has known me for any length of time, one fact quickly becomes apparent: I'm an avid Robin Hood fan. I have been for as long as I can remember. My first clear memory is watching Errol Flynn's *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, and my college dorm room was decorated with a poster of Flynn in his best heroic pose from the film – that poster now graces my dining room wall. I have an extensive collection of Robin Hood memorabilia that I've been amassing for over 20 years. All of this to say, I simply could not leave the outlaw off the syllabus in this course, even though we are not going to make it to Nottingham. This post only serves as a small snippet of an introduction to the character.

One of the first mentions of Robin Hood recorded is in William Langland's fourteenth-century *Piers Plowman*. The site "[Robin Hood: The Facts and the Fiction](#)" contains a good online resource, as it pulls out from the Skeat version of the three parallel texts (A, B, and C) the passages related to
the outlaw legend. The most significant is in Passus B.V in which the sin Sloth lists his shortcomings:

I can nouȝte perfitly my pater-noster as the prest it syngeth,  
But I can rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf erle of Chestre,  
Ac neither of owre lorde ne of owre lady the lest that euere was made. (B.V.401-3)

In a similar fashion as Saint Augustine who castigates his younger self at the beginning of the *Confessions* for loving to read the stories of Aeneas and Dido rather than to focus on God, Sloth here admits to knowing the stories of Robin Hood rather than any prayers or Christian stories. The implication is that the stories of Robin Hood are well-known popular tales at this time. In the guide to an exhibit at the Robbins Library in 2006-07, John Chandler writes, “Sloth’s familiarity with drinking songs about Robin Hood, but utter lack of knowledge of things spiritual, also reflects the concern of the Church for the souls of people who likely attended mass grudgingly, but could readily recite popular songs.” This echoes Augustine’s disgust with himself over the same issue. And, yet, we all know the popular stories continue to be “more fun.” As a side note, this particular line also plays a role in my interest in memory in Passus V of *Piers Plowman*. Directly afterwards Sloth talks about forgetting his responsibilities and what he owes to others, making forgetfulness a part of the sin he personifies. The Robin Hood line too speaks to memory in that he can remember what he wants to, just not what he “should.” Selective memory, we call it today.

It is this popularity that makes Robin Hood a frequent presence in early printed books. For the first part of the week (which was, again, interrupted by snow – I’m beginning to feel that Mother Nature has a grudge), we read selections from the *TEAMS Robin Hood and Other Outlaws*. In particular, we read the “Early Ballads and Tales,” which mostly originated in the fifteenth century. For whom were these tales written? In their introduction to the text, editors Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren state:

The audience has been a matter of speculation. Some have thought it was close to the discontented peasantry who were central to the 1381 revolt (Hilton, 1976); another view saw the ballads as a set of general complaints from the lower gentry (Holt, 1989). Neither party has accounted for the lack of agrarian and tenurial issues, apart from the unusual episode of the knight in the Gest. Another commentator has seen the dynamic of the ballads in the struggle for power in towns themselves and the forest as a fantasy land of freedom (Tardif, 1983). As a result of these debates there now seems general agreement that the audience was not single, that it represented the social mobility of the late Middle Ages, and the myth was diffused across a wide variety of social groupings who were alive to the dangers of increasingly central authority, whether over town, village, or forest (Coss, 1985).

The “general agreement” that these tales indicate the “social mobility of the late Middle Ages” and that they appeal to a “wide variety of social groupings” seems like an accurate and useful way to think about them.

The early ballads are quite different from the Robin Hood that has evolved down to us today. Yet, at the same time, we see familiar characters and characteristics. Robin’s home in the greenwood (wherever that greenwood may be – Sherwood Forest or ones nearby) is fairly constant. One of my favorite memories is visiting the Major Oak in Sherwood (photo below). It is an incredibly peaceful location, and it is easy enough to imagine Robin and his merry men living a life of unabashed freedom under its branches.

Also, his companion Little John is generally always nearby. The other familiar figures get added over time. Maid Marian, for instance, seems to be an addition when the tale is transformed into plays performed on May Day. Robin’s association with the spring is seen in the early ballads. In “Robin Hood and the Monk,” the tale begins, “Erly in a May mornyng” (l. 10). In “Robin Hood and the Potter,” the season is summer, yet no less descriptive of nature and its bounty:

In schomer, when the leves spryng,  
The bloschoms on every bowe,
So merey doyt the berdys syng
Yn wodys merey now. (ll. 1-4)

It is no stretch to see how these stories, which laud the greenwood, the newness of leaves, and the singing of birds, became associated with the May Day celebrations. And it is no surprise that Robin needed a lady; thus, Marian was born.

The outlaw himself is not the noble gentleman who only thinks of the poor and the plight of the common man. He is the common man in the ballads, described as a yeoman, and we see him frequently not showing what we have come to know as his trademark chivalrous mercy to his opponents. Indeed, many of the texts end with the death of the opponent. For instance, in “Robin Hood and the Monk,” Little John unceremoniously hauls the monk who betrayed his friend to the ground and kills him as another man Much kills the page with him simply to keep him quiet:

John smote of the munkis hed,
No longer wolde he dwell;
So did Moch the litull page,
For ferd lest he wolde tell. (ll. 203-6)

It is a bloody scene with little in the way of any kind of mercy for those who oppose the outlaw or his men. Robin Hood’s famous nobility and chivalrous nature are later inventions, added and manipulated for the needs of his various audiences throughout the centuries.

For the second part of the week, we turned away from the late medieval origins of Robin Hood and looked instead at the evolution of the legend and its continued popularity. To that end, we read Stephen Knight’s article “Remembering Robin Hood.” Also, while it feels a bit odd to do so, I assigned my students to listen to/watch a lecture I gave a couple of years ago on this very subject, entitled “Robin Hood, the Once and Future Hero.” The lecture is here for those interested in it:

My point in this lecture is that there are many qualities the Robin Hood legends possess that have kept them alive and vibrant for centuries. One of the major qualities is that greenwood I mentioned earlier. While there are challenges in being exiled from society, “outside” of the “law,” there is also freedom in not having to answer to authority, in seeing those who are corrupt receive the justice they deserve (but might not receive if protected by society). Robin is often depicted, in whatever incarnation, as freely roaming the woods, doing what he wants when he wants to do it, making his own law and living his own code. This is appealing to a variety of people, not the least of which would be children who sometimes chafe against adult authority, which explains why the legend became such a popular children’s story:
His popularity with children and the relatively powerless continued long after the popular vogue of the other medieval romance survivals faded. His identification with unsophisticated readers, especially children, during his extraordinary extended vogue may well explain, even though there is no categorical evidence, his peculiar place in the company of children. (Brockman 68)

Or, as Joseph Falaky Nagy, writes:

The narrative tradition about Robin Hood, which thrived in folklore and the popular literature of England from the medieval period to the nineteenth century, reflects the worldwide fascination with the figure of the outlaw, the man who exists beyond human society and has adventures which would be impossible for normal members of society in their normal social environments. (198)

Robin Hood is in a position, that space between civilized and uncivilized, doing what we only think about doing, that speaks to those who, for one reason or another, seek an escape from limitations.

In the Weekly Activity for Robin Hood, the students were asked to pick a film featuring the character (alas, with the exception of the animated Disney version, as it is an “easy” choice) in order to think about its representation of the outlaw, particularly considering how it stacks up against the original tales. There are many lists available of Robin Hood films; one, for example, is on IMDb, if you feel like a marathon (or you could just raid my DVD collection!). What, might you ask, is my favorite? The Adventures of Robin Hood will always have a special place in my heart and, thus, is in a class of its own. Also, it tends to be the iconic image of the hero. The live-action Disney The Story of Robin Hood with Richard Todd is also one I return to often; I think the music makes it particularly special. Interestingly enough, in that one, Robin does not start off as a nobleman. The silent version with Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., is incredible; the full version is available on YouTube, which I have included below. The athleticism of Fairbanks combined with its charming simplicity is, in a word, wonderful. (I also have a soft spot for it because I received as a gift several original props from the film. They are a centerpiece of my collection.) The most recent Robin Hood with Russell Crowe is disappointing on many levels. Although it attempts to return to the grittiness of the original tales, it fails to capture the lightness and freedom so inherent in the legend. It does, nonetheless, speak to the idea that the story is malleable and can be applied to different situations in various time periods (here, Magna Carta).

Class links:
- Google Map Project
- Robin Hood Readlists
- Storify Journals

Next week: we visit Oxford and Tolkien.

–Kisha

PS In my spare time (what little there is!), I am reading the King Raven trilogy by Stephen R. Lawhead. It reimagines the Robin Hood legend in Wales and sets it during the time of William Rufus, son of William the Conqueror. It is a new take on the story, but, so far, it is working well, and I am far enough in that I can recommend it.

References:


A Plague on the History Channel

I've just spent a few minutes stocking up my Netflix account with a set of films and documentaries with a vaguely medieval theme, ranging in quality from "looks like a pleasant enough way to kill a couple of hours" to "how bad could it possibly be?" This is one of the ways I like to entertain myself during breaks from teaching, and sometimes it pays off with a new short scene to use or reference in a lecture, or at least with greater (if sometimes painful) knowledge of what my students may have seen or heard recently. One of the documentaries that popped up during my search is a hideous misfire by the History Channel called The Dark Ages (A&E Home Video, Dir. C. Cassel, 2007), which I actually watched during a break this past year. The Dark Ages was merely bad—poor production elements, questionable research, and people who looked as if they wished they were elsewhere. I watched it and forgot it.

The Dark Ages DVD, however, harbored a dark secret—a second documentary, The Plague (A&E Home Video, Dir. R. Gardner, 2005), which was presumably deemed so terrible that it was never given an independent release and instead was hitched onto The Dark Ages' bonus features rather like a surprise yersinia pestis-carrying flea on a rat. I watched this second excremental documentary in a state of disbelief—and, caught somewhere between horror and grudging wonder, I offer the following comments. In the interest of getting on with my day, I'll limit myself here to just five moments in The Plague that made me want to scream out my pain and agony and then track down the writer and director to make them suffer as I have suffered.

FIVE MOMENTS IN THE PLAGUE THAT SAPPED MY FAITH IN HUMANITY

1. The narration

The story this documentary and its guest experts (who acquit themselves reasonably well and, I assume, had no idea what was going to be done to their efforts) are trying to tell is already quite dramatic enough—the Great Mortality (the actual name used in the 14th century for the plague; “Black Death” wasn’t coined until the 19th century) wiped out something close to half the population of Eurasia in the space of a few years, and left a fundamentally different geopolitical and socioeconomic world behind. Apparently this wasn’t thought to be enough to sustain the interest of the target audience of this documentary (children? Intelligent border collies? Steven Seagal fans? Steven Seagal?), so the producers tracked down a voice-over actor who contributed a passable impression of the movie-trailer guy (“In a world where...”) and gave him a script that also sounds like a bad movie trailer, so that the narration provides us with grimly-intoned but oddly silly lines like “they had no idea that within the ships were cargoes of food, textiles...and death.” One assumes that, in fact, the crew of the average 14th century merchant ship did know that at least two of those things were down there, unless sailors were routinely shocked when they’d peer down into the ship’s hold: “Say, Guiseppe, where did all these carefully-stowed containers of cinnamon, pepper, and assorted foodstuffs of the East come from? And is that a waterproof-wrapped selection of costly silks brocaded with silver thread down there, or am I nuts?”

Oh, and while we’re on the voice work...

2. The silly, silly accents

Admittedly, this is a pet peeve of mine—movies and documentaries that want us to understand that the person speaking is NBOA (Not British Or American), but that don’t trust us to read subtitles. The solution, and it’s apparently so obvious that even the director of The Plague figured it out, is to bring in actors to put on fake and hilarious accents so we know they’re playing foreigners. In this documentary, there are “Mongols,” “French,” and “Italian” speakers in addition to English speakers (and, of course, the Movie Trailer guy). Leaving aside for the moment the problem of sticking fancy versions of these accents on the characters, and the fact that they’re all speaking modern English anyway, it’s hard to take the whole thing seriously when half the speakers sound like Peter Sellers. The whole thing reaches the height of inanity when a voice-over, purportedly that of a medieval chronicler Gabriel di Musis, speaks on the horror of the plague: “Ala-mighty a-God, son ava de entire-a human-a race, we are-a wallowing in-a the mire av manifol-a wickedness...” I assume the voice actor was wearing a bushy black mustache, holding a plate of spaghetti and meatballs, and recording his lines on break from helping his brother Luigi to fight Donkey Kong. Later, the same actor reads an account by Agnolo di Tuola of the early mass graves dug in the Italian countryside, presumably not realizing that his I’m-a-da-pizza-guy delivery somewhat undermines the gravity of the lines: “In-a many-a places, great-a peets were dug and-a piled-a deep with-a da multitude of-a da dead..."
3. The presentation of various popular legends as fact

There are a few really egregious examples here--my favorite is the recounting of a well-known (and, quite possibly, true) story about the Mongol army using "crude catapults" to toss plague victims into the city of Kaffa. The narrative seems a little confused about whether or not this happened: "While the story might be more legend than fact, the Mongol pestilence spreads to the townspeople of Kaffa. But while these facts seem clear, a mystery remains..."

I should say so. For starters, what facts are we talking about here? Why bother including the disclaimer immediately before asserting that the catapult-a-plague strategy was real? How, exactly, do apocryphal stories spread disease? And while we're at it, is it worth mentioning that plague could also be spread quite easily between two clashing armies, with or without what the narrator (in another of his Movie Trailer moments) calls "the first example of germ warfare"?

4. A World Gone To Hell

I lost count of the number of variations on this particular theme--it's almost the theme of the entire film. I counted at least half-a-dozen actual references to "hell on earth" or "a world gone to hell." It's not a question of whether things were really very bad in the late 1340s--they absolutely were. The problem is that these lines, almost invariably, are accompanied either by pictures of actual fire (even if that means just showing a torch on a wall) or by totally incongruous images (such as a bored-looking Jewish merchant named "Agamnet" or something similar, whose performer was apparently chosen specifically for his ability to make Jewish merchants look shifty and untrustworthy, but who here seems to be wondering whether he left the oven on). Apparently the idea of people actually dying of a disease they couldn't explain and couldn't stop isn't horrifying enough, but a picture of a large candle is meant to make us widdle ourselves in horror.

5. Joan of England

The documentary builds its narrative around a number of key figures (among them Pope Clement VI, the physician Guy de Chauliac, and Agamnet). One of the major plotlines revolves around Joan of England, the teenage daughter of the English king Edward III. Since essentially the only significant thing anyone knows about Joan is that she died in 1348 on her way to Castile to meet her fiancé, the documentary has to work extra-hard to build some kind of suspense around her story. It fails utterly to do this, opting instead for a series of tooth-achingly-ironic ruminations on the elaborate security precautions and vast personal guard her father expended on getting her safely to Castile: "Along with many distinguished clergymen and diplomats, 100 bowmen will make the journey will make the journey to protect this...precious cargo. But their precautions will come to nothing. Within a year, almost all of them will be dead..." Later, in case we'd forgotten, we are reminded, "Joan is perhaps the most well-guarded woman in Europe right now...but archers and castle walls cannot shield her from an unseen enemy. The phantom, the plague, strikes randomly."

By the time Joan finally grows ill, we are fully expecting an over-the-top moment, and even here the documentary goes beyond our wildest hopes and fears. As we watch the actress playing Joan laugh and toss her hair fetchingly with her attendants, the narrator intones, "Joan, princess of England, favorite daughter of the king of England, does not survive. Like almost half the population of Europe, she falls victim..." [dramatic pause, while church bells begin to chime] "...to the Black Death. Her father, Edward III, is powerless to do anything but mourn." And the scene fades out, but not before we are treated to a fade-in of magnified green-tinted *yersinia pestis* bacteria and a brief image of a skull over Joan's face.

There's plenty more that was equally ridiculous--the hammy overacting of the Flagellants; the constant re-use of a limited amount of re-enactment footage (so that peasant burials in Italy, France, Germany, and England all involve suspiciously familiar-looking peasants); the shots of Joan of England playing "Ring Around the Rosey" with her friends, seemingly without the connect-the-dots irony which limns the rest of her story; the depiction of prostitutes in plague-era Germany as, apparently, bawdy Italians; and on and on.

If you have the opportunity and are of a *Mystery Science Theater 3000* temperament, I recommend hunting down the full documentary and treating yourself to an unparalleled viewing experience. If you take the rather narrow view that something calling itself a "documentary" ought to resist forced melodrama or, indeed, be in any way based on documentary evidence, then you can probably afford to skip it.

In the meantime, does anyone have any recommendations for me to add to my Winter Recess viewing list?

~jpsexton

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