REFRESHING THE LEGEND OF SHERWOOD FOREST: MANIPULATION OF HISTORY AND TRADITION IN RIDLEY SCOTT'S *ROBIN HOOD* (2010)

Robert Bresson once said "Le cinéma n'est pas un spectacle, c'est une écriture,"[1] and 53 years later the theory still holds true. Ridley Scott has both rewritten and spectacularised Robin Hood in his 2010 movie (*Robin Hood*), in which he tackles the mythos from a new perspective by presenting the origins rather than just another spin-off. In the process, he rewrites the legend in such a way that it fits modern audiences at the same time that recedes in time into the more obscure Robin Hood that first appeared in English justices the 13th century.[2] It is there that one might find the originality of the piece, since, as Hollywood has accostumed us already, it takes some liberties with the historical and philological sources.

The script for the movie was originally meant to be based on an original screenplay by Ethan Reiff and Cyrus Voris called *Nottingham* (Martel 2010). The plot centered around the Sheriff of Nottingham rather than the traditional hero. The Sheriff was Robert Tornham, a historical Sheriff of Cyprus who in the script was invited to be Sheriff in England by Richard the Lionheart as payment for his good deeds in the siege of Cyprus. This back story provides a more emotional view of the famous antagonist, in opposition to a more terrorist-like view of the endearing Merry Men, who now carry chaos into the otherwise tranquil Sherwood Forest. The plot of this first script tried to steer clear of the most standard Robin Hood elements and into something more of a CSI

[1] *Cahiers de Cinéma*, October 1957, p. 5.

[2] It should be noted, though, that the earliest literary appearences of Robin Hood are the ballads in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (*c.* 1360–87): "I kan noght parfitly my Paternoster as the preest it syngeth, But I kan rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre" (v.395).

show of the Middle Ages. The Sheriff sets out to investigate a series of strange murders in Sherwood Forest, which lead him to chase Robin Hood, only to find out in the end that the mighty hero was being framed. Reiff himself asserted that he and his team used real 12th-century source material to research medieval English forensic investigation techniques. "We didn't make too much up out of the blue," he affirmed (Reiff 2010). Unfortunately that was not to hold true with the version that would actually see the light.

With the signing of Ridley Scott and Russell Crowe, Brian Helgeland was hired to rewrite the script. It was not a one-time conversion, but a series of adaptations that saw many ideas, most of them new to the traditional depiction of the legend. At one point the project took a Fight-Club-esque twist which contemplated Robin and the Sheriff being the same person (Horowitz 2008). Why such a fresh idea, and perhaps the most original Robin Hood plot to date, was turned into a rather forgettable movie is anyone's guess. It seems that Scott did not like any of the original ideas, and thus settled for a more traditional approach. Allegedly, Scott's fascination with archery aided in the final product, which was a very dramatic alteration of the plot, as explained in by Hollywood screenwriter William Martel (Martel 2010). The final cut answers to Ridley Scott's ideas, which shape the remake almost entirely: Robin is an evermighty bowman belonging to Richard the Lionheart's army as head of a specialized archery division where he fights amongst Alan-a-Dale and Will Scarlet (coincidentally represented as a "scarlet" headed Welsh), who are returning home from the crusades only to find that John I has taken the throne and is ruling with an iron fist. Needless to say, archery is an important element in the film, and key to the elaboration of the characters. The result is the accommodation of more traditional characters and a name change that falls in line with the plethora of Robin Hoods already out there (Carroll 2010). As a matter of fact, Walter Scott already pictured this scenario: in his 1820 novel *Ivanhoe*, we see Robin fighting against John Lackland in order to restore Richard

the Lionheart's throne. Certainly this is no coincidence, and Ridley Scott surely was familiar with Walter Scott's work.

While the execution of the film may leave some things to be desired, and the story may have nearly nothing in common with the original script, the project does present a few refreshing elements on the over-exploited theme that Douglas Fairbanks popularized. Despite its low scores on *IMDB*[3] and *Rotten Tomatoes*,[4] the film peaked as the second-highest grossing medieval-themed movie ever, only surpassed by Kevin Costner's 1991 *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, and it scored over $320 million during its first month.

The film attempts to move away from the more conventional, hackneyed version of the Man in Green Tights by telling the origin of the famed hero rather than one his exploits, perhaps influenced by a spat of prequel movies that have proved fairly successful in recent years, be it the famed *Star Wars* prequel trilogy released between 1999 and 2005, or *Red Dragon* (2002), prequel to *Silence of the Lambs*. The project is, thus, new enough to pique the interest of the audience yet close enough to the more traditional versions to make it recognizable. The primary fallout, however, lies in the everpresent tradition of trying to understand medieval England through postmillennial western eyes. This is understandable since it carries a great deal of modern baggage, ranging from Jungian psychoanalysis to women's rights movements. This all contributes to the transformation of classical or medieval models of heroism, rendering them anachronistic in many ways. The film's relevance from a critical perspective lies precisely in its reshaping of the traditional elements. The divergence in tradition granted the film

[3] *Internet Movie DataBase* is an online database and rating platform for movies, television, and video games owned by Amazon.com and one of the top 50 websites in terms of traffic, with over 52 million registered users.

[4] *Rotten Tomatoes* is a film review aggregator and forum owned by Warner Bros. subsidiary Flixter. Though not as massive as *IMDB*, it is a highly popular website amongst film fanatics.

low acclaim by critics. These "inaccuracies," however, are somewhat of a tradition in itself for most films, especially in Scott's own (let us not forget the dynastic liberties in *Gladiator* [2000] or the complete remaking of history in *Kingdom of Heaven* [2005]), and yet Ridley Scott's Robin manages to remain unlike the majority of his predecessors, retaining some the original script's initial spirit. We see a Sheriff of Sherwood Forest (Matthew Macfadyen) that is more pathetic, almost pitiful, that seems to want the audience to feel sorry for him; and the odious Godfrey (Mark Strong) usurping the role of the main antagonist. Russell Crowe is a darker and heftier Robin than other Hollywood icons, and the figure that emerges in this film is closer to the older, more violent tradition of the legend. In fact, Ridley Scott redraws some of the central characters in the traditional plotline (like Marian and Friar Tuck) and introduces a new figure (Walter Loxley) which forces a redefinition of Robin's identity, more in touch with the earlier appearances of the 13th and 14th centuries.

The figure of Maid Marian is one that has a long history of interpretations. In the Kevin Costner epic *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), she is a maternal cousin to the sovereign, while in the BBC TV Show adaption of 2006 she is the daughter of the former Sheriff and was betrothed to Robin before he left for the Holy Land. The majority of Marians out there are those of dainty women or princesses, save for the occasional and not mainstream feminist prototype, as in the *Forestwife* novels by Theresa Tomlinson. At the end of the pathway lies Ridley Scott's Marian (Cate Blanchett), a strong powerful woman, of noble origin yet skilled in combat techniques and fairly independent. One would not expect less nowadays, when female characters are rising rapidly as heroic figures. The popular response to the surge of female warrior characters is thus divided between those who favor the claim to power of historically submissive female characters, and those who see that the heroic virtues attributed to these women are but male traits crudely transplanted. However, Maid Marian remains true to

her early appearances in the 16th century: "A bonny fine maid of a noble degree" who searches for Robin Hood "With quiver and bow, sword, buckler and all, /Thus armed was Marian most bold" (Child 2003: iii.219)

Friar Tuck (Mark Addy) undergoes a similar rewriting. In Ridley Scott's film he appears as the traditional fat, bald and jovial monk with a great love of ale, but with the swordsmanship, archery skills and hot-headed temper that characterised him in the original versions of the 16th century. Thus, the literary Tuck provides a perfect character for Ridley Scott and his signature combat set pieces as well as the go-to comic relief, which is actually a role often played by him in the earlier original appearances. He provides moments of gratuitous absurdity at times, especially when he first robs a chariot with the bishop's grain and later ravages some French soldiers with beehives (from which he distills illegal honey mead). The truth, however, is that the original Friar Tuck is much more along the lines of the rest of the characters in the film. This makes sense so as to keep the coherence of the plot: even though his original character came out of the 16th century May Games, he truly belongs to the darker early Middle Ages, giving more unity to the combination of personalities in the film.

Scott also makes what appears to be a clever yet obscure wink to the Robin Hood universe that may well have a pivotal importance in the future development of the story by introducting Walter Loxley (Max von Sydow), Maid Marian's father-in-law in the film. The frame of an "origin story," especially one that has not been approached yet, allows for this kind of reinterpretations and complications. This character means a redefinition of the hero's identity through a clever shifting of names: in the film, Robin is never Hood, but Longstride. Marian's father-in-law, whose name is Sir Walter of Loxley, claims to have fought with Longstride's father in past years. Sir Walter Loxley is of noble origins, come to decadence because of rising taxes and bad management of the realm. In later flashbacks, we see that Robin's father was, in fact, friends

with Walter and died because of his obstination in seeking victory against the tyrannical rule of the king (one previous to John I). The name Robert/Robin de Locksley (or Loxley) has been attributed to Robin Hood ever since his first appearances so it comes as a curious coincidence that Walter's son, Robert de Loxley, should die in the arms of Robin Longstride, and that the latter is now occupying the sentimental role of Walter's son. But perhaps it is not that farfetched of an idea. Returning to Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Robin Hood is a Saxon nobleman that goes by the last name Locksley. This information has two key elements: the fact that he goes by the name Locksley, and that he should be of Saxon origin.

By using the name Loxley in such a way, Ridley Scott is referencing the original and ambiguous identity of the hero and the result is a possible reformatting of the basic historical story structure: that Robin Hood is not one man but, at least, two. Longstride's mission to return the remains of Loxley's son, killed by the French, establishes a connection between the two and triggers the conversion of Crowe's character into the famous hero. Robin Hood is an entity, a leader that fights for justice, not just one person, but many individuals who occupy the role. This theory then implies that it is not until Robin Longstride takes the role (unknowingly, one assumes) that the legend becomes such and that the historical implications become more than a few skirmishes against the royal forces. It is not until the end of the movie, when Robin has proved himself worthy of the legend, that he is referred to as "Robin of the Hood."

The film, in any case, is not devoid of familiarity. Even though the plot is centered around the genesis of the figure of Hood, and one may even infer a total twist of the popular story, there is abundance of archetypal motifs to which the audience can relate. The usage of previously known bits of a story is a strong element in most prequels or "origin" stories, since it allows the public to relate on a satisfaction-based level by allowing some to understand and some to obliviously pass these references. The strongpoint is

made evident in that these references create but a second layer to the film, even though it can be easily followed and enjoyed by those who are not familiar with them. It makes the invented origin much more plausible in the eyes of the spectator, and also attracts more spectators.

The other notable element is Walter Scott's presentation of Robin as a Saxon nobleman, which has darker implications that may seem at first hand. At one point in the film we have a Germanic or Anglo-saxon funeral, that is, a ritual burning on a pyre. Not only would it be unlikely that a Christian lord be burnt on a pyre rather than buried, it was also illegal and contrary to the teachings of the Church. It is curious, however, that these characters were to be associated with Germanic images if we were to look at it through a Whiggish approach to history.[5] Whig historiography asumes that the past is but an inevitable path, winding progressively towards an ever-greater liberty and enlightenment. It thus focuses on successful ideas, rather than failed theories. It originates during the 17th century, right around the time Robin Hood's legend is becoming standardised and gentrified. In the Whig view of history, Germanic and Anglo-Saxon imagery has a positive connotation attached to liberty and democratic values in opposition to the conceived notion of tyrannical rule, associated with the Normans and the Catholics, as is the case in stories like Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. The introduction of a Germanic funeral in the film now seems more logical, just as logical as the fact that Robin should be a Saxon nobleman. In fact,

[5] Whig historiography originates in the 18th century as a result of the loss in popularity of the constitutional monarchy in England. Before Whig history, the model society of England were the Normans as well as the Arthurian myth, through which the crown was legitimized. The original historiographic source was, thus, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*c.* 1130). After Whig history becomes mainstream, the focus centers on Anglo-Saxon views of society as a means to justify British history as a march of progress whose inevitable outcome is the constitutional monarchy. The historical source becomes Wace's *Roman de Brut* (*c.* 1150) and anything French or Norman (e.g. Monmouth's *Historia*) would seem as opposing and thus a hindering of England's progression.

the movie plays with this notion: the spectator first encounters Robin fighting with Richard the Lionheart, one would asume, thus, that he is either a Norman or a sympathetic to the cause. But through climactic flashbacks we learn that his father was a nobleman that fought for liberty against the Norman kings. This implies a subtle allegory: Robin fights for the Normans but later learns he is not one of them, a cathartic moment in which he decides to oppose the absolutist King John I in order to restore the balance claimed by the noblemen to which his father belonged. The absolute monarchy of the Normans dueling the mutually dependent Saxon law of the people. This is textbook Whig historiography. This theory is further justified in the story by the exaggerated French antagonism or by the fact that free people under Danelaw became persecuted under Norman law in Sherwood forest (Reddish 2012). Even the music in the film hints at this: a subtle score with clear Celtic and Germanic influences that backs the action. The Germanic-style funeral is but a way of inferring that these noblemen where Saxons themselves, and thus exalting the Saxon or Germanic roots of "the good guys."

Not surprisingly, Scott not only invents Robin's origin, but also a good part of English medieval history in the process. Many films have done so in order to accommodate a plot that would not make sense otherwise, changing the course of history on the way. There again lies some of the originality of the film. Though some of the historical pretensions of Scott's film are rather preposterous, they are also made to seem strangely possible, including the stellar appearances of other-timely gadgets. This is mere Hollywood entertainment, where there is an innate need to spectacularize and give a more epic touch to the story. This need of grandiose spectacle is not new to Hollywood, and is especially abundant in previous Ridley Scott films. Movies like the aforementioned *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) or *Tristan & Isolde* (2006) have taken liberally on their source materials.

First and foremost, the French invading the lands of England by crossing the English Channel may look implausible to an audience with a basic knowledge of British history, as the intermittent war between the English and French crowns in the medieval period was fought mostly on continental soil. The episode is made even more unbelievable as we see the French disembarking in the beaches of southern England in specialised landing ships in a scene more worthy of *Saving Private Ryan* than 13th century England. The mere consideration of a possibility of this happening is ludicrous, since the first example of a specialized landing craft of any sort appeared in 1920, well over 700 years after the film takes place. The film's narrative, however, is not without historical basis. There was indeed an attempt at invasion in 1216, in the context of the First Barons' War, as the noblemen who rebelled against John offered the throne to prince Louis of France and asked him to invade England. Scott, instead, has the barons help the King to repel the French. This rewriting of a historical event is not surprising, taking into account Mr. Scott's idea of their *gaulois* neighbours. The animosity towards the French is rather amusing and over the top. It seems a bit stereotypical, especially since the action is set in a time when the differences between one and the other weren't that clear. That the director is English does not help hide this fact: we see King Philip of France slurping oysters in the midst of a war in what we can interpret as a brazen attempt at separating the "good" factions from the "evil" ones. It is fairly anachronistic as well, for this image fits more into the "Freedom Fries" era of post-9/11 anti-French sentiment than in the 1200's. The amusement reaches its peak when the French, being French, have their chefs serving soup (*cassoulette* or *pot au feu*, one imagines) in the middle of the siege, one of whom, on a mere whim, picks up a crossbow and kills Richard the Lionheart, changing the course of British history forever. Again, Scott attributes post-millennial perspectives conceived for post-millennial spectators to medieval events. Although seemingly comical, the idea that an ordinary, anonymous person can have

such an impact on history is a rather attractive democratic notion, one that is exploited by Robin Hood (assuming he was anonymous at the time, which the film also implies) during the rest of the movie, which loads Robin with trappings of heroism that prove his democratic attitude, sometimes paralysing the narrative. As A. O. Scott sumarises in his *New York Times* article, "[Robin Hood] is for liberty though—the English kind, by the way—so if you have anything bad to say about him, you'd better say it in French" (Scott 2010). This idea of populism is not strange to either Scott nor Crowe, since we see the same process exploited in movies like *Gladiator*. Some might even argue that the character of Robin Hood too closely ressembles that of Maximus in the 2000 film. As happened in *Gladiator*, he is actor to a world-changing historic event: as a Roman he plotted to overthrow the Emperor himself, and as Robin he will become the percursor of Magna Carta. Just one more historical liberty in Hollywood's long lived tradition.

Robin is not directly responsible for the signing of the 1215 document, but, according to the film, he took a first draft of the charter to the King in 1199, who then proceeds to burn it after swearing on his mother's life (apparently the only reasonable French person in the film) that he would sign it. In Mr. Scott's words: "[i]f there were to be a sequel to Robin Hood, you would have a constant enemy throughout, King John, and you would follow his reign of 17 years, and the signing of Magna Carta could be Robin's final act."[6] We can assume then that this was meant as *segue* for future films more than as a history lesson. Having Magna Carta be something belonging to the lower classes is another democratic notion that befits modern times, but in reality it was a vindication of the privileges of the Barons against those of the King (Bartlett 2000; Ramos 2004). Hardly something a mason, as it is implied in the film, would be able to conceive, let alone enact.

[6] *Sunday Times* interview, April 3rd , 2010

In all fairness, Scott and his team did put some effort into making the film seem, at the very least, historically plausible. Erin McCarthy wrote a piece for *Popular Mechanics*[7] in which we learn that, "to make sure it was historically accurate, designers hit the books—and the museums, including the British Museum in London and the Royal Armories in Leeds" (McCarthy 2010). The result is a set of weapons that mostly *look* realistic. Some incongruencies arise from the over-elaborated siege ram, or the helmet worn by Crowe's character, which is somewhat of an every type of helmet and none at the same time.

But perhaps the most serious problem when we approach the film is one that involves not only the director, but also the spectators. It is a problem that affects not this film in particular, but almost all of the film reinterpretations of famous legends, stories or traditions. To remold the legend of Robin Hood in this manner is to look upon a legend that started out with a very basic and obscure plotline through contemporary eyes. The result is that there is often a comparison between versions, one is usually that is better or worse than another because it does or does not respect that general structure that was established long ago. Perhaps a modern idea of authorship makes us believe that anything that modifies the original story is of inferior quality, but in reality the obscure origins of the legend provide a lot of room for innovation and remodelation. The story has evolved with each time period having a different view, consequence of the cultural values and ideals of the time. In this way, 21st century rewritings of the Robin Hood legend are going to be different, and that is the natural course of events. The weight of Ridley Scott's version on the overall course of the legend will not be determined until many years from now. Perhaps the originality of the plot will be undermined by medieval purists, perhaps its historical inaccuracies will weigh the film down,

[7] *Popular Mechanics* is a classic magazine regarding science, automotive and technology. Its first issue dates from 1902 and is published by Hearst Corporation.

or perhaps it may remain as one version that tied together loose strings that elevate its relevance to history and continue a popular tradition. Only time will tell; at least the success of Scott's version makes clear that Robin and his men still have some merry years to go.

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