



THE FOUNDATION FOR ECONOMIC EDUCATION, INC.
IRVINGTON-ON-HUDSON, NEW YORK 10533

The Influence of Robin Hood

ROBIN HOOD, contrary to folklore, never once robbed the rich nor did he ever give anything to the poor. How could he? He did not exist as a mortal being!

The daring long-bowman of Sherwood Forest, or his earlier French prototype, Robin des Bois, was the mythical hero of ritual drama, a mere figment of the primitive mind.¹ Nonetheless, were we able to assess the influence on our times of all characters, real as well as imaginary, Robin might well top the list.

Is there a plausible explanation of this myth and its influence? Perhaps.

During the late Middle Ages — prior to the emergence of the Industrial Revolution — society was organized along feudal lines. The affluence of the very few rested on political power and privilege. The unfavored millions lived primitively in ignorance and abject poverty. A human being was “to the manor born” or he was not. There were few in-betweens; it was either serf or lord, and most men were serfs.

The modicum of wealth generated by a feudal-type society was apportioned, not on the basis of individual productivity and willing exchange, but solely in accord with status. It was a division-of-the-spoils arrangement. The affluence of the few was at the expense of the many.

Primitive minds were unable to do anything about the feudal power apparatus, a system for keeping people in their places. Wealth, in the world of reality, was impossible because

serfdom spells poverty, as preordained. Hopelessly doomed to this unhappy fate, the serfs fashioned a dream world! Happiness being a state of mind, why not, when denied the manor and its privileges, enjoy the experiences vicariously? Nor need we regard such a flight of fancy as so strange; people all about us, even in our own affluent day and age, often imagine themselves in some position superior to their own — “if I only had a million dollars. . .” and that sort of thing.

So the serfs or vassals of merrie old England showered their affections on Robin Hood, a mythical character who robbed the rich and distributed the loot to the poor. Thus, in a sense, the scales were balanced; the serfs got back in their dream world what had been taken from them in the work-a-day world. According to our scale of values, it was an eye for an eye, injustice for injustice — at least in fantasy. Here we have primitive folklore saying in effect: Do unto others in dreamland what the rich have been doing unto us in our England.

To the serfs, Robin Hood achieved “the distinction of sainthood, in having a festival allotted to him, and solemn games instituted in his memory.” So popular was this hero of ritual drama that Robin Hood’s Day was observed not only by the serfs but “by kings or princes and grave magistrates.” It was politically inexpedient not to pay obeisance to the serfs’ hero.

Robin Hood is no longer celebrated in festival form, but we must not lose sight of the fact that, popularly, in our country today, he remains “a good guy.”

¹ See the chapter, “Robin Hood,” in *The Hero, A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* by Lord Raglan (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 291 pp. \$1.00.