

The Gest of Robyn Hode:
A Critical and Textual Commentary

by Robert B. Waltz

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*To Patricia Rosenberg
the last of the few*

*Oh, I will build me a boat of silver,
Steer it with a golden oar,
And I will sail out of this sad harbor
And never sail back to this dark shore.*

*For swiftly come all the tides returning,
Swiftly go then and will not stay.
There is no boatman can net the morning,
There is no boatman can net the day.
– J. B. Goodenough*

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Preface

Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* contains about forty ballads or ballad-like pieces about Robin Hood. "The Gest of Robyn Hode" is not only the longest and most important of these, it is the longest ballad by far in Child's collection – so long that it should properly be called a romance, not a ballad. It is also our most important source for the legend of Robin Hood, particularly in its early stages.

In 2012, I published my first book on the "Gest." This consisted primarily of a text plus a semi-modernized "translation." That shorter book remains the edition for those who want a straightforward text and translation of the "Gest." This expanded edition fills in the gaps left by the limited scope of the earlier book. Apart from correcting a few typographical errors, it retains my earlier critical text of the "Gest" (the first to be based on a stemmatic method) – but it adds a full critical apparatus, discussion of variant readings, and glosses; it is the first full-blown critical edition of the "Gest" ever published. For this reason, the critical text no longer has the parallel modern English rendering; the modernized edition has been maintained – but since it is no longer set beside the text of the "Gest," I have taken the opportunity to make it less a more modern, independent text. And I have added a detailed notes on the meaning of the "Gest," an extensive vocabulary, and assorted documents which illustrate the "Gest." There is also a full introduction on the Robin Hood legend, the historical setting of the "Gest," and how the setting of the "Gest" differs from that of later Robin Hood tales. This book is for in-depth study – meaning that scholars who wish to engage in that study will benefit from having both volumes, to reduce the need for cross-referencing.

Very roughly, the book divides into seven parts: The modern version of the text of the "Gest," for use by those who do not wish to deal with Middle English; an introduction to the Robin Hood corpus; a discussion of the historical problems of the "Gest" in particular; a detailed commentary on the "Gest"; the critical edition of the Middle English text of the "Gest"; a discussion of the text of the "Gest"; and samples of works important to understanding the "Gest." Plus, of course, the Bibliography (the key to the citations in the text), glossary, chronology, and index.

I also owe thanks to the members of the Ballad-L mailing list for ideas and encouragement. Dr. David Engle made valuable suggestions about the presentation. Martha Galep supplied personal support as well as information about keeping horses. Ed Cray and Dick Greenhaus encouraged publication of the original shorter book. My parents, Dorothy and Fred Waltz, supplied financial assistance. Thanks also to Catie Jo Pidel (who indirectly inspired me to start the work), Elizabeth Rosenberg, Patricia Rosenberg, Mollie Spillman, and Sarah Cagley.

Much of the rest of this preface parallels the acknowledgments in my earlier volume. The hypothesis that the "Gest" describes events of the reign of Edward II, for instance, goes back to Joseph Hunter – although the hypothesis is much modified here, and unlike Hunter I do not believe Robin Hood was an actual person alive in the reign of Edward. Much information about the various copies of the "Gest" is based on the work of Thomas Ohlgren. I have used the works of J. C. Holt extensively. Consulting these and other references has of course made this a better book.

If You Like This Book

This book is free. This is deliberate; I want people to have access to the information. I have no idea if it will prove either useful or entertaining to anyone. But if you do find it worthwhile, I would urge you to consider making a contribution. No, not to me. To the good organizations listed below, to help them in their future work.

First of all, consider ordering my shorter edition of *The Gest of Robyn Hode*. I have no financial interest in that book; I have donated the royalties to the publishers, CAMSCO music and Loomis House Press. But by buying the book, you will encourage them to publish more folklore volumes. You can find Loomis House online at

<http://www.loomishousepress.com/>

CAMSCO music is at

<http://www.camscomusic.com/>

If that doesn't interest you, or if you wish to do more, here are three charities which I would consider particularly worthy of your gifts:

- The Friends of the Folk Archive Fund of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. The Folklife Center is one of the largest repositories of folklore and folk song in the Americas, and this fund serves to support some of its best work. Learn more at <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/gift.html>.
- The Ramsey County Historical Society. www.rchs.com. Although I did not really use their archives in the preparation of this book, the Society gave me strong support in the half year during which I completed the work. (Note: because of the effort needed to file contributions, donations to the Historical Society should be at least \$10.)
- The Union of Concerned Scientists. www.ucsusa.org.

On their behalf, my thanks.

Summary: The Plot of the Gest of Robyn Hode

[*THE FIRST FIT.*] When we begin, Robin is with Little John, Much the Miller's Son, and Will Scathelock, sending them out to seek a "guest." They are to use no force, but bring him back to dinner.

The three outlaws spy a downtrodden knight along the road. They bring him back to Robin, who serves him a fine meal – but then demands that the knight pay. The knight admits that he has only a few shillings. Robin orders John to search his baggage. John determines that it is true. Asked how he came to be so poor, the knight reveals that he has mortgaged all his lands to the Abbot of St. Mary's in order to go bail for his son, who is charged with murder. The reckoning is due, and he cannot repay, and if the Abbot will not extend the loan, all the knight's lands will be lost.

Robin and his band are moved with pity. Robin offers to pay the debt, if the knight will give surety. The knight can give none except the Virgin Mary. Robin, out of his love for the Virgin, at once accepts. He gives the knight four hundred pounds, and offers Little John as a servant.

[*THE SECOND FIT.*] The abbot of St. Mary's is at dinner, happily contemplating the thought that he will soon have the knight's land. The knight shows up in poor clothing and begs the abbot and his allies for more time. The abbot refuses. The knight produces the four hundred pounds lent him by Robin and stalks out, ruining the abbot's day.

[*THE THIRD FIT.*] Little John takes part in an archery contest, and wins easily. The Sheriff of Nottingham, impressed, takes him on as a servant. A year later, when the sheriff is out hunting, John fails to get his dinner – and attacks the butler. He then fights with the cook. The fight is a draw, and John invites the cook to join Robin's band. The cook agrees, and they head off to the greenwood after robbing the sheriff's home. The sheriff himself is tricked into Robin's lair by John, where he is forced to spend a night in the cold, eat from his own stolen plate, and to promise to be Robin's friend.

[*THE FOURTH FIT.*] It is time for the knight to repay his debt to Robin. He has done well, and starts on his way to Barnsdale – although he is delayed on his way by a wrestling. While this is going on, Robin sends out his men to find another "guest." This time, they catch a monk and his company heading for London to complain about the knight. Most of the company flees, but John and the others bring the monk, and his baggage, back to Robin. The monk claims to have relatively little money, but John searches the bags and finds that he has eight hundred pounds. Whereas the knight had been honored because he told the truth, the monk is punished because he lied. Robin confiscates the eight hundred pounds. When the knight arrives to pay back the four hundred pounds, Robin declares that the Virgin Mary has already repaid the loan, and gives the knight the four hundred pound excess.

[*THE FIFTH FIT.*] There is another archery contest in Nottingham, and this time Robin competes and wins the prize. But he and his men are recognized and forced to flee. Little John is injured in the fight. The band is forced to take refuge at the castle of the knight, now revealed to be Sir Richard at the Lee.

[*THE SIXTH FIT.*] Sir Richard is still under siege, but calls on the sheriff to consult the king. The siege is lifted, and Robin returns to the greenwood – but the sheriff then traps Sir Richard and prepares to take him away. The knight's wife appeals to Robin,

who rescues Sir Richard and kills the sheriff, calling him a betrayer of the oath he earlier took. The knight, however, cannot return to his castle; he joins Robin in the forest.

[*THE SEVENTH FIT.*] King Edward decides to take matters into his own hands and deal with Robin Hood himself. He comes north, but cannot find Robin. At last it is suggested that he enter the forest in disguise. The king agrees, and his party puts on the clothing of monks. Robin and his band waylay them – but eventually recognize the king and beg pardon. The king grants it.

[*THE EIGHTH FIT.*] The king sets out for Nottingham, bringing Robin and his band with him. There is panic in the town, but the King agrees to take Robin into his service. Robin tries to cut a great figure at court, but after a year, his money is gone and most of his men have deserted him. He asks the king's leave to visit a chapel he had built in Barnsdale. The king grudgingly gives him leave to depart for a few days. Robin returns home and takes up his life in the greenwood. After twenty-two years, he feels old and ill, and goes to Kirklees to be bled. Instead of being cured, he is bled to death by the prioress and her lover Sir Roger of Doncaster. The poem concludes with a pious wish for the soul of Robin, who “dyde pore men moch god” [“did poor men much good”].

The Geste of Robin Hood: A Modern Adaption

This follows the lineation of the Middle English [Critical Text of the Gest of Robyn Hode](#) below, but with spelling modernized and archaic words replaced. Some attention has been paid to rhyme and meter, but the primary goal is to use the modern words that best fit the Middle English original. No attempt has been made to assure consistency in modernation. In what follows, a [page number in brackets] provides a link to the page containing an explanatory note. Understand that some of the renderings are guesses, or only one of several possible meanings.

THE FIRST FIT

- 1 Stop and listen, gentlemen, [\[174\]](#)
Who are of freeborn blood;
I'll tell you of a good yeoman, [\[176\]](#)
His name was Robin Hood.

- 2 Robin was a proud outlaw, [\[177\]](#)
While he walked on ground;
So courteous an outlaw as he was [\[178\]](#)
Was never yet one found.

- 3 Robin stood in Barnsdale, [\[179\]](#)
And leanéd on a tree;
And by him there stood Little John, [\[181\]](#)
A good yeoman was he.

- 4 And also did good Scathelock, [\[182\]](#)
And Much, the miller's son; [\[183\]](#)
There was no inch of his body
But it was worth a pound. [\[183\]](#)

- 5 At that time up spoke Little John
All unto Robin Hood:
Master, if you would dine on time,
It would do you much good.

- 6 Up then spoke good Robin; [\[185\]](#)
'To dine have I no lust,
Till that I have some bold baron,
Or some unknown guest.

- 7 ['We shall await some bold abbot] [\[185\]](#)
That may pay for the best,
Or some knight or some squire
That dwells here in the west.' [\[185\]](#)

- 8 A faithful style had Robin then;
In the land where that he were,
Every day ere he would dine [185]
Three masses would he hear.
- 9 The one in worship of the Father,
Another of the Holy Ghost,
The third was of our dear Lady, [186]
That he loved yet the most.
- 10 Robin loved our dear Lady; [186]
For fear of deadly sin, [186]
Never would he harm a company
That any woman was in.
- 11 'Master,' then said Little John [188]
'Before we our board shall spread,
Tell us where that we shall go
And what life we shall lead.
- 12 'Where we shall take, where we shall leave,
Where we shall abide behind;
Where we shall rob, where we shall reave,
Where we shall beat and bind?'
- 13 'Never use force,' then said Robin; [188]
'We shall do well enough;
But look you do no farmer harm,
That tills with his plow.
- 14 'No more shall ye [rob] a good yeoman
Who walks by the green thicket;
Neither a knight nor a squire
Who would be a good fellow. [188]
- 15 'These bishops and these archbishops, [189]
Ye shall them beat and bind; [189]
The high sheriff of Nottingham, [189]
Let him not slip your mind.'
- 16 'This word shall be kept,' said Little John
'And this lesson we shall fear;
It's late in the day; God send us a guest,
That we may be at our dinner!'

- 17 'Take your good bow in your hand,' said Robin;
'Let Much go with ye;
And so shall William Scathelock
And no man stay with me. [194]
- 18 'And walk up to the Saylis, [194]
And so to Watling Street [194]
And wait after some unknown guest,
By chance you may them meet.
- 19 Be he earl, or any baron, [195]
Abbot, or any knight,
Bring him to lodge to me;
His dinner shall be right.'
- 20 They went up to the Saylis, [197]
These yeoman all three;
They looked east, they looked west;
They might no man there see.
- 21 But as they looked in Barnsdale,
Down a hidden street, [197]
Then came a knight riding; [197]
Full soon they did him meet.
- 22 All dreary was his semblance,
And little was his pride;
His one foot in the stirrup stood,
The other waved beside.
- 23 His hood hung in his two eyes;
His clothes were a poor array;
A sorrier man than he was one
Rode never in summer day.
- 24 Little John was full courteous, [198]
And set him on his knee:
'Welcome be ye, gentle knight,
Welcome are ye to me.
- 25 'Welcome be you to greenwood,
Gracious knight and free;
My master has waited fasting for you,
Sir, all these hours three.'

- 26 'Who is your master?' said the knight;
John said, 'Robin Hood.'
'He is a good yeoman,' said the knight,
'Of him I have heard much good.'
- 27 'I agree,' he said, 'with you to go,
My brothers, together here;
My purpose was to have dined today
At Blythe or Doncaster.' [198]
- 28 Forth then went this gentle knight,
With a woeful face;
The tears out of his eyes ran,
And fell down on his face.
- 29 They brought him to the lodge-door; [198]
Where Robin did him see,
Full courteously he took off his hood [199]
And set him on his knee.
- 30 'Welcome, sir knight,' then said Robin
'Welcome you are to me;
I have awaited you fasting, sir,
All these hours three.'
- 31 Then answered the gentle knight,
With words both fair and free,
'God save you, good Robin,
And all your company.'
- 32 They washed together and wiped their hands, [199]
And set to their dinner;
Bread and wine they had enough, [199]
And sweetbreads of the deer.
- 33 Swans and pheasants they had full good, [199]
And fowl from out the river;
Not even the smallest bird they lacked
That ever was bred on briar.
- 34 'Do gladly, sir knight,' said Robin;
'Thank you, sir,' said he;
'Such a dinner I have not had
For at least weekés three.'

- 35 'If I come again, Robin,
Here by this country,
As good a dinner I shall you make
As you have made for me.'
- 36 'Thank you, knight,' then said Robin;
'My dinner when that I have,
I was never so greedy, by dear worthy God,
My dinner for to crave.
- 37 'But pay before you leave,' said Robin; [200]
'I think it only right;
It was never the custom, by dear worthy God,
A yeomen to pay for a knight.'
- 38 'I have nought in my coffers,' said the knight,
That I may proffer for shame':
'Little John, go look,' said Robin, [200]
'And do not fear the blame.'
- 39 'Tell me truth,' then said Robin,
'So God have part of you.'
'I have but ten shillings,' said the knight,
'So God have part of me.'
- 40 'If you have no more,' said Robin,
'I will not take one penny;
And if you had need of any more,
More shall I lend you.'
- 41 'Go now forth, Little John,
The truth tell you me;
If there be no more but ten shillings,
Not one penny will I see.'
- 42 Little John spread out his mantle [201]
Full fair upon the ground,
And there he found in the knight's coffer
Exactly half a pound.
- 43 Little John let it lie full still, [202]
And went to his master beloved;
'What tidings, John?' said Robin;
'Sir, the knight is true enough.' [202]

- 44 'A glass of the best wine!' said Robin,
'The knight shall begin;
A great wonder it seems to me
Your clothing is so thin.'
- 45 'Tell me one word,' said Robin,
'Explain it, if you please;
I think you were made a knight by force [202]
Or else of yeomanry.
- 46 'Or else you have been a sorry husband,
And lived in quarrel and strife;
An usurer, or else a lecher,' said Robin,
'With wrong you have led your life.'
- 47 I am none of those,' said the knight,
'By God that made me;
An hundred winter here before [203]
Mine ancestors knights have been.
- 48 'But oft it befalls, Robin, [205]
A man may be disgraced;
Unless God that sits in heaven above
May amend his state.
- 49 'Within this two years, Robin,' he said,
My neighbors well it ken,
Four hundred pounds of good money [205]
Full well I had to spend.
- 50 'Now have I no good,' said the knight,
'God has shapéd such an end,
But my children and my wife,
Till God it may amend.'
- 51 'In what manner,' said Robin,
Have you lost your riches?'
For my great folly,' he said,
And for my kindness.
- 52 'I had a son, forsooth, Robin, [207]
That should have been my heir, [207]
When he was twenty winters old,
In field would joust full fair. [207]

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