

THE IMPOVERISHED AND THE EMPOWERED:
LOLLARD POLEMIC IN PRE-REFORMATION
POPULAR EXPRESSION

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Departmental Honors in
the Department of English
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

December 10, 2012

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- Adam Bell.....“Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough, and William of Cloudesley”
- Curtal Friar.....“Robin Hood and the Curtal Friar”
- Gamelyn.....“The Tale of Gamelyn”
- Gandelyn.....“Robyn and Gandelyn”
- Gest.....“A Gest of Robyn Hode”
- Gisborne.....“Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne”
- Potter.....“Robin Hood and the Potter”
- Progress.....“Robin Hood’s Progress to Nottingham”
- Monk.....“Robin Hood and the Monk”
- Shryff*.....*Robyn Hod and the Shryff off Notyngham*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Jill C. Havens, my supervising professor, for her patient guidance and encouragement throughout this research process. I would also like to thank Professors Ariane Balizet and Jodi Campbell for their enthusiasm, encouragement, and constructive criticism. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Professor Linda Hughes for her help in navigating the Honors thesis process and to Amy Sentementes for her keen advice and review. Finally, I wish to thank my parents, Russell and Diann Allen, as well as my extended family for their support and encouragement throughout my research.

INTRODUCTION

The Robin Hood literary tradition is the central text of this discussion, though other texts, like *Piers Plowman*, serve as supplementary examples that situate the Robin Hood legend within its contemporary context. The Robin Hood texts were part of a larger social, political, and religious movement in England in the later medieval period. *Piers Plowman* is the first literary acknowledgement of Robin Hood as a cultural icon, so this text's position in that larger movement further illustrates to readers the complexity of the issues exhibited in the Robin Hood legend. Despite possible differences in authorial intention, the Robin Hood tales and *Piers Plowman* actually share several central ideas about poverty, social hierarchy, authority, and clerical failure. Although many scholars today focus on either the textual tradition of Robin Hood or its themes of violence and the outlaw, these concepts were perhaps of greater concern to the tales' contemporary audiences. Comparison of the Robin Hood literary tradition with the polemic of the proto-Protestant heresy known as Lollardy and the literary tradition of *Piers Plowman* reveals the possibility that the various authors of the Robin Hood tales also sought to comment on the prevalent social concerns of the period.

In the Middle Ages, English society did not perceive of itself as a vertically hierarchical society; instead, each estate of citizens had certain responsibilities meant for the maintenance and improvement of the entire state. Laborers provided food and tools, for example, while the clergy provided for the spiritual needs of the community; similarly, the nobility led and protected the other classes from outside threats. The three estates of society thus provided for one another. This ideal of society included the leadership of God and the King; as time went on, however, society began to question the role of other

lesser sources of authority, like the clergy and municipal authority. Literary traditions and characters that emerged through this period show a growing recognition of the potential such constructs of authority, supplemental to God and King, had to unjustly rule over others.

When imbalances occurred in society amongst the three estates, they were reflected in traditions like the Robin Hood legend and other literature, which emerged to critique such imbalances. Such traditions reflect this societal preoccupation with morality and justice, and these themes appear in both elite and popular literature. A thematic paradigm emerged that pitted accepted ideas of natural morality, particularly in religion and law, against immorality, which was considered unnatural. The heretical Lollard movement, originated by the teachings and writings of John Wyclif, added to this tension in late medieval English society. Wyclif argued against such artificial constructs. Specifically, Wyclif advocated for the simplicity of the more organic early Christian church, not the vast and complex hierarchical structure characteristic of the medieval Roman Catholic Church.

Not excluded from this phenomenon, the Robin Hood literary tradition reflects both the religious conviction and dissent of the period. While Robin Hood texts do not advocate expressly for social revolution or heresy, the ideals utilized by both orthodox and heterodox adherents seem to appear throughout the history of the legend. Such a presence in the popular culture of the time attests to the possible power that Lollard thought held in the centuries leading up to the Reformation. This thesis first examines the Robin Hood literary tradition as it developed up until 1534, when the Act of Supremacy established King Henry VIII as the head of the Church of England. Next, this discussion

introduces *Piers Plowman*, a popular text of the Middle Ages, as well as a selection of Wycliffite texts and themes. A cross-examination of the concerns of Wycliffite polemic with the Robin Hood literary tradition and other popular texts of the period concludes this thesis. This literary comparison essentially suggests that popular audiences were increasingly voicing their comments through popular forms on socio-political matters of the time and thus establishing their presence and agency in public matters.

The tales, ballads, plays, and other extant texts of the Robin Hood literary tradition reveal little alteration of the essential story and purpose of Robin Hood. Their social agenda focuses on the issues of poverty, social hierarchy, authority, and clerical failure, is perhaps the tradition's primary concern. As the tradition continued on into the early modern period, the same issues remained intact, in spite of the fact that they may have become irrelevant. These issues, therefore, seem to have been essential to the greater tradition's resonance and propagation.

The following survey of the Robin Hood literary tradition focuses on texts possibly composed before 1534, after which critiques of the Catholic Church in England essentially became moot.

Survey of the Literary Tradition

Like other works of popular expression in the Middle Ages, the Robin Hood tales in written form are the descendants of an equally rich oral culture. Many of the ballads that follow are dated based upon their approximated publication date, not their original telling; therefore, true composition dates likely far precede publication dates. For a timeline of approximated and known dates of composition and publication, see Appendix A.

Local Government

Perhaps most well known and most despised in the Robin Hood tales of today are the forces of the local government that often take form in the Sheriff. In tale after tale and ballad after ballad, contributors to the Robin Hood literary tradition present new antagonistic encounters between Robin and the Sheriff. Even in texts pre-dating the Robin Hood tradition, this contentious relationship between outlaws and municipal officials plays a key role.

In their anthology of the Robin Hood tales and other, similar outlaw tales, medieval English scholars Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren propose that “The Tale of Gamelyn,” a tale of an earlier outlaw hero composed sometime between 1350-1370, is a possible source text for the later Robin Hood tradition (185, 191). The tale relates the story of Gamelyn following his father’s death, after which his brother denies him his portion of the family estate (“Gamelyn” lines 70-80). Gamelyn then competes in a wrestling contest, and against all odds, he wins (lines 227-50), but his brother then shuts him out of their home (lines 283-6). Gamelyn is able to force himself in, and he then holds a long feast in celebration (lines 295-328). Once all of Gamelyn’s friends leave, his brother beats him and binds him up in their dining hall for all of their later guests to see; at the same time, the evil brother tells the guests lies of Gamelyn’s insanity (lines 342-86). Eventually, Gamelyn is able to convince one of the family’s officers, a friend named Adam, to help release him in the middle of the night (lines 394-414).

They then form a plan for Gamelyn to avenge himself, and Gamelyn returns to the post to which his brother had fettered him (lines 423-50). During a great feast that his brother hosts, attended by many clergy whom Gamelyn clearly opposes, both Adam and

Gamelyn take advantage of their vulnerability and brutalize everyone present (lines 455-540). They then escape into the forest (lines 612-3). While there, they meet a band of men of which Gamelyn eventually becomes the leader (lines 620-90). During this time, Gamelyn's brother becomes the Sheriff (line 693). Eventually, Gamelyn's other brother, Sir Ote, learns of all that has happened, and he proceeds to advocate for Gamelyn (lines 726-64). The evil Sheriff overtakes Sir Ote and binds him as he had young Gamelyn (lines 797-805). At this event, Gamelyn and his men stage a rescue of Ote; following their triumph, they try the wicked men and hang them (lines 809-82). The king, pleased with Sir Ote and Gamelyn, then honors them with positions of authority (lines 886-91).

A century after Gamelyn's tale, society continued to question and evaluate such good and evil institutions of localized authority, this time with the outlaw figure of Robin Hood. "Robin Hood and the Monk," for which scholars give the approximate publication date of 1450 or 1461, begins with a parting of ways between Robin and Little John after a disagreement about whether or not Robin should go into town for mass (Knight & Ohlgren 31; lines 63-6). Robin goes alone, and the Monk betrays him to the Sheriff, who then throws him in jail ("The Monk" lines 75-118). Little John and Much then avenge Robin on the Monk by killing him and his page (lines 203-6). The two men then later trick the Sheriff and take their opportunity to help Robin escape from the prison (lines 267-86). The King, believed to possibly be the "comely" King Edward, then pardons the men, essentially trumping the authority of the local government (lines 331-54).

The Sheriff's personification of impotency and corruption does not occur in the ballads alone. *Robyn Hod and the Shryff of Notyngham* is the earliest extant play of the Robin Hood tradition, which Knight and Ohlgren date sometime in the mid-1470s (269).

A knight offers to capture Robin, and the Sheriff readily agrees to pay him for the service (*Robyn Hod* lines 1-4). Robin eventually defeats the knight, but around the same time the Sheriff and his men capture several of Robin's fellow outlaws after they endeavor to seek and aid Robin (lines 19-36). However, Robin overthrows the jailor, and all escape back into the woods (lines 41-2).

Ballads like "Robin Hood and the Potter," the only surviving manuscript of which Knight and Ohlgren date to 1500, further explore the ineffectiveness of the municipal systems of justice explored by *Shryff* (57). In this tale, Robin comes across a Potter on the road; the two men fight, and the Potter wins ("The Potter" lines 35-60). Robin then offers to try to sell some of the Potter's wares for him in the town of Nottingham, and the Potter agrees to lend Robin his clothing (lines 93-6). The Sheriff's wife invites the Potter, Robin in disguise, to join them for dinner, during which Robin learns of an archery tournament, formed for the purpose of catching him (lines 143-72). Robin then wins the contest and tricks the Sheriff into following him into the forest in search of meeting Robin (lines 209-29). Robin's men then capture the Sheriff, take his belongings, and send him humiliated back into town (lines 270-91).

As in the previous literary works, the Sheriff plays an informative role in "A Gest of Robyn Hode." Scholars, led by Holt, agree on the date 1450 as a safe approximation for the composition of this tale (Knight & Ohlgren 81). A long text, the "Gest" begins with Robin and his men lending money to an impoverished knight whose lands the church has taken ("A Gest" lines 193-265). Following this, Little John, under pretense, stays with the Sheriff of the town, but he then leaves and lures the Sheriff into the woods, where Robin's men trap the Sheriff and take his possessions (lines 577-816). After time

has elapsed, the Knight returns to repay Robin for his aid (lines 1043-80). The Sheriff then holds an archery contest, a trap into which Robin falls, and the outlaws take refuge with the Knight (lines 1127-242). After Robin's loyal men come to his rescue, they kill the Sheriff (lines 1385-92). The King and his men go in search of Robin, and to accomplish this quest, they dress as monks (lines 1477-84). The ensuing encounter reveals both Robin's deep-seated loyalty and the King's mercy and flexibility (lines 1541-68). The King invites Robin to court, and while there he eventually spends all of his money (lines 1729-32). He returns to the woods and to his men, but a wicked Prioress later deceives and kills him (lines 1789-1820). Multiple enemies present themselves in this text, some of whom this paper will discuss further; however, the specific interaction between Robin and the Sheriff reveal an already-present antagonism between the two and seems to hint to a more general discontent with local officials.

Similarly, the Sheriff in "Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough, and William of Cloudesley" again becomes the dupe of outlawed men, illustrating the seemingly futile services of the local government. The names of Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough, and William of Cloudesley first appear on Parliament's Roll of outlaws in 1432, and by 1557 this text was mainstream, as revealed by its frequent reference in other tales and performances (Knight & Ohlgren 235). "Adam Bell," which includes many motifs traditionally ascribed to the Robin Hood tradition and thus qualifies it as an analogue if not as a source, begins with the three men becoming outlaws as a result of hunting deer; a woman in William's house then betrays William while he is visiting his family, and the Sheriff arrests him ("Adam Bell" lines 13, 49-68). Adam and Clim then rescue William and throw a celebratory feast (lines 310-89). After these festivities, William by chance

reunites with his family in the woods, and the three men go to the King to ask for his pardon (lines 392-471). The Queen then intercedes for the men, and they participate in an archery contest in which William shoots an apple that is resting on his son's head (lines 498-649). The King and Queen then reward all of the men, and William's family, with honorable positions in which to serve the kingdom (lines 652-70). As in "Monk," national authority steps in to end the abuses of the incompetent local government entities.

As in previous tales, the Sheriff does not possess the capabilities necessary to thwart Robin on his own. Instead, he must rely on the conspiracy and accessory of others, including clergy and mercenaries. Similar stories, possible source texts, arose in the late 1400s and early 1500s, but the only surviving manuscript copy of "Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne" is in a collection of stories that Knight and Ohlgren date to the middle of the 17th century (169). Similar to previous tales, Robin and Little John part ways after a fight ("Guy of Gisborne" lines 43-4). The Sheriff captures little John, and Robin and Guy have a shooting contest (lines 75-114). Following this contest, the two men battle one another, and Robin wins (lines 143-62). Robin beheads and defaces Guy and then goes to the rescue of Little John, who then kills the Sheriff (lines 163-234).

The figure of the Sheriff serves as the personification of corruption and impotency, particularly as it derives from and affects institutional and governmental authority on a local level. This constant struggle within the literary tradition suggests that criminality and inefficiency plagued the systems of justice and that these evils were detrimental to the people of England. Society recognized this characterization of good and evil influences on society early in the Robin Hood tradition. As Gamelyn's brother expresses his wickedness more and more overtly, he eventually becomes wicked enough to deserve

the position of Sheriff (line 693), an implicit description that the English audience may well have come to associate more and more as indicative of his degree of villainy.

One of the primary functions of the Sheriff, or any of Robin's foes, is not only to reveal and examine evils present in society, but also to further illustrate the sources of potential redemption within society. Robin's characterization as a man of the lower estates juxtaposes the iniquity of the artificially constructed systems of government and law enforcement. While the legends of Robin Hood as a whole do not advocate for the abolition of such an artificial system of governance, his tales would seem to suggest that the governing system in place should more closely reflect the natural morality his character exemplifies over false and unjust standards of hierarchical society.

National Government

These early tales of the tradition often prominently contrast the goodness and mercy of national authority with the incompetence and cruelty of local authority. "Monk," the "Gest," and "Adam Bell" all include a visit by the monarch to Robin Hood and his men, and in these tales the King pardons the men and essentially blesses their loyal actions.

These tales display corruption and immorality as antithetical to the natural morality manifested in Robin, his men, and the King they serve. Local authority conspires against and tyrannizes its subjects, illustrating the oppression inherent in society if those in positions of authority do not possess the benevolent and compassionate characteristics of Robin and the King. Interestingly, the examination of roles of authority within these texts suggests two seemingly contradictory impulses within the society. First, these creative works recognize English loyalty to the royal monarch. Traditionally only

the lower level positions chosen by election or appointment, positions such as that of the Sheriff, were prone to corruption in these literary representations. The royal throne was a sacred position, and God alone chose the man sitting upon it. In this way, these texts do not challenge traditional social stratification; they simply explore the inherent abuses of such a system and portray the positive and negative characters possible in such an establishment.

In addition to this solidified acceptance of the system of England's government, however, the tales of this tradition also challenge complete inequality otherwise perpetuated by such a hierarchical institution. Though England remained a hierarchical, monarchical nation, the literary tradition of Robin Hood has never ceased to advocate for equal standards of morality from those of high and low status.

Clergy

Relative to the legal institutions challenged by Robin, the clergy have a unique place in the Robin Hood tradition, having members on the sides of both right and wrong, humane and avaricious. "Monk" and the "Gest" illustrate the abuses members of clergy were capable of inflicting on society. In many cases, these men and women were barely distinguishable from the power-hungry Sheriff; in fact, the clergy were often in league with the corrupt members of the local government. In "Robin Hood and the Curtal Friar," however, Robin Hood meets his match in the form of a member of the clergy.¹ In the tale, Robin goes to challenge the friar to prove his archery skills ("The Curtal Friar" lines 29-36). The friar comes on top with the help of his dogs, and he then decides to join the band (lines 121-52). The friar's superiority to Robin in combat and his subsequent admission to the band of men illustrates the possibility of virtue in the clerical estate.

Any sort of definitive character of the clergy – whether they are good or bad – as portrayed throughout the entirety of the Robin Hood tradition remains ambiguous. The individual tales, once placed within their respective historical context, may provide further clues for exploration and determination of cultural perspectives. However, in more texts than not, the audience particularly sees the clergy as worldly, unscrupulous, and immoral. In contrast, Robin remains true to proper piety and religious sentiment. Robin directly challenges the accepted practices of the clergy, both of high and low status, while simultaneously confirming his own propriety. Unlike the clergy, he does not forsake his religious disciplines, but he upholds basic precepts of Christianity, such as his exemplification of charity and brotherhood, both of which are essential to community. As a result, his actions only further support his characteristic piety.

Other Miscellaneous Enemies

Though the texts already discussed confront adversaries familiar to any medieval or early modern English audience exposed to the lasting name of Robin Hood, some ballads and tales composed throughout the traditions' long history introduce unfamiliar opposition to the forest's merry men. Such unfamiliar opposition includes villains and antagonists not included in popular adaptations of the tale, characters such as Wrennok and other members of the peasant class of men. Like Robin's other adversaries, though, these enemies still represent greed, corruption, and deception.

“Robyn and Gandelyn,” preserved in a depository of lyrics from 1450, tells of the two men, Robyn and Gandelyn, shooting deer in the forest together when Wrennok shoots and kills Robyn (Knight & Ohlgren 227; lines 20-37). Gandelyn then avenges Robyn by defeating Wrennok in a shooting contest (lines 64-75). This ballad is free of

class warfare. The outlaws' conflict is with one of their own class. The tale reveals the self-defeating nature of inter-class conflict. Perpetuating strife within a community is futile and destructive consequences result from such actions among community members. This tale is one of several which shows an increasing recognition of the propensity for wickedness that exists in every human's soul, regardless of class.

Similarly, "Robin Hood's Progress to Nottingham" also recounts Robin's discovery that deception and falsity extend to his peers, other men of his talents and interests. Knight and Ohlgren argue that audiences already knew the original source of Progress by the late 1500s, but this version is a later retelling of another source text dated 1656 (507). In the ballad, Robin ventures out to compete in an archery contest, and along the way he makes a bet with some foresters that he encounters ("Progress to Nottingham" lines 7-26). He wins this bet, but all of the men refuse to honor their wager (lines 37-42). Robin then kills them all and escapes into the woods (lines 47-70). Essentially, the foresters reject honor, indicting themselves for immorality. Even common man lacks honor and dedication to a single code of conduct.

These texts, along with "Gisborne," recognize that society's enemies are not always members of the presiding, powerful institutions. Morality is ambiguous and unguaranteed in humankind – this fault is not reserved for the elite alone – and these texts reveal the realism of this literary tradition as a whole. Even Robin responds viciously in some tales, leading his audience to question his own morality. The writers' intentions, and the dynamic specifics of Robin's personal principles that these writers controlled, relate to these events in the literary tradition. One may argue that the writer is suggesting that Robin has a moral obligation to punish those who reject his approved standards of

interaction and behavior. Or, one may also argue that the writer means to reveal the human dimension of Robin: that he, too, has faults, and no man can behave purely in every action.

Implications

Robin's resistance to tyrannical influence, whether governmental, clerical, or societal, illustrates the natural recognition of right and wrong in humanity and the common desire, indeed common necessity, of applying such universal standards of action. The forces of oppression may vary, but their primary function differs little. These adversarial characters, and Robin's relationship with them, illustrate the flaws and concerns of the larger society, including the distribution of wealth, social hierarchy, local and national authority, and clerical responsibilities. The various authors of the early works of the Robin Hood literary tradition seem to use the tales to comment on these prevalent issues, specifically critiquing abuse of power and corruption within both church and government.

Piers Plowman

Piers Plowman, an allegorical narrative of a man's quest to understand appropriate Christian living in medieval England, written in 1370 contains the first literary mention of the Robin Hood tradition when Sloth confesses "I can't say my 'Our Father' properly as the priest intones it at mass. I know some ballads about Robin Hood. . . but I don't know any about our Lord or our Lady" (*Piers Plowman* 5.55). This allusion is the first literary acknowledgment of Robin Hood as a cultural icon, although in this context the secular Robin Hood distracts men and women from the study of holy teachings. The alliterative verse was also, like the Robin Hood ballads, a popular form of

literature in the Middle Ages. Thus, *Piers Plowman* serves as an additional example of social discourse in popular literature of the Middle Ages. The text begins with the narrator, Will, coming upon a field representative of mankind's world between a tower and a dungeon, Heaven and Hell, respectively (*Piers Plowman*, Prologue, 1). Will's successive dreams, or *visio*, illustrate his quest to find "Do-Well," "Do-Better," and "Do-Best" and to understand what each of these dictate. The text ends with an implied call to action, urging the clergy and all Christians to live out the virtues they profess (Schmidt, "Introduction," xxxvi).

As A.V.C. Schmidt acknowledges, the text currently has at least three different versions, all acknowledged as the work of William Langland ("Introduction," xi). The first version, called the A-text, is unfinished and dated circa 1370; the B-text is completed and dated approximately 1378-9, and the C-text, an incomplete, final revision, is dated circa 1386 (Schmidt, "Introduction," xi). This paper uses Schmidt's translation of the B-text. Schmidt admits that most scholars consider the B-text to have the best poetry; he also suggests that this version of the text made the greatest historical impact following its publication and again during the Reformation ("Introduction," xii). The B-text was completed about two years before the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, a rebellion during which leaders like John Ball exhibited a deep familiarity with the text of *Piers Plowman* in their polemic (Schmidt, "Introduction," xii). Langland then seems to have begun an additional revision of the already completed text, possibly signifying a desire to distance his text from association with revolutionaries (Schmidt, "Introduction," xv). The orthodoxy of the text is also arguably ambiguous, so *Piers Plowman* risked false association with heretical movements against the established Catholic Church in England.

Piers Plowman focuses on the issues of poverty, social hierarchy, authority, and clerical weakness. In his sermon to the entire realm, Reason addresses each of these concerns. He pleads with the King “to love the common people,” for they are a King’s “real treasure” and “sovereign remedy in time of supreme need” (*Piers Plowman* 5.43). In this statement, Reason makes two assertions. First, he establishes the value of the lowest estate, urging the King to recognize their immense value and treat them in a manner indicative of their worth. Reason recognizes the social hierarchy, seeking not to diminish it but to maintain its beneficial purposes, the harmony and productiveness of a unified society. Reason also speaks to those “in whose hands lies the administration of the law;” he commands these men not to “hunger and thirst for golden gifts, but the treasure of truth and right” (*Piers Plowman* 5.43-4). Reason recognizes what must therefore have been a contemporary issue, and he urges those clothed in authority to use it honorably and not for selfish gain. Reason’s longest address, however, is to the “higher and lower ranks of the clergy” (*Piers Plowman* 5.43). He urges them to “put into practice . . . whatever [they] exhort [their] hearers to do in [their] sermons” (*Piers Plowman* 5.43). Again, Reason’s address reveals the prevalent social and religious issues of the time, and he criticizes the clergy for their hypocrisy, urging them to adhere to their own teachings. *Piers Plowman* and the Robin Hood tales share the same concerns and comment on them in similar fashions. However, popular literature was not alone in addressing these societal ills. Dissenting religious thinkers of the time also voiced their concerns about the welfare of the English state.

Lollardy

During the late Middle Ages, societal tensions across social, political, and religious lines defined people's and classes' relationships with one another. In particular, shifts in ideas of morality and justice are evident in the rise of heterodox sects. By the fifteenth century, the term "Lollard" had become synonymous with any type of heresy or treason against authoritative institutions (Cooper 88). Scholar Robert Lutton proposes that "the most significant shifts in religious beliefs and practices prior to the Reformation may not have been experienced as conversion from orthodoxy to heresy but as processes or moments of transition and reconstruction for which there was no official vocabulary of articulation" (195). Thus, the term "Lollardy" became a sort of catchall for thoughts or teachings deemed heretical. Ian Forrest further argues that the line between heresy and orthodoxy was unclear, and many vacillated between the two during this period (64-65); such fluid boundaries further complicated the successful identification of heresy. The original term denoted those (also known as Wycliffites) who followed the teachings of John Wyclif, a scholar who taught at Oxford in the fourteenth century.

Hudson outlines the general creed held by the Lollards:

The centre-piece was the primacy of scripture. From this sprang the theology of the eucharist, of confession and absolution, the rejection of clerical temporalities, of the papacy and of all forms of private religion, the doubts about the legality of images, pilgrimages, war and oaths, and the demand that neither civil nor canon law should counter the plain import of scripture. Secondary to this were the twin doctrines derived immediately from Wyclif, of the *congregatio predestinatorum* and of dominion; from these derived Lollard notions of the church, and of the

functions and powers of temporal rulers, whilst both reinforced their theology of absolution and raised those doubts about the ministry of sinful clergy. (*Premature* 389)

Wyclif and his followers even went so far as to call the pope “a blasfemer and Lucifer and antecrist” (“The Power of the Pope” lines 6-7). Wyclif further believed in individual accountability, that each Christian would give an account of his or her life on Judgment Day (Cooper 39). Above all, Lollards believed that as a result of this individual responsibility, the Scriptures were the supreme source of instruction and guidance, and because of this primacy, all Christians, even the lay people, should have access to them. As Hudson argues, Wyclif repeatedly stressed the authority of scripture in dictating the purpose of and functions within the Church (“Introduction,” 6). This emphasis on Biblical guidance was exhibited in Lollards’ testimonies, arguments, and actions (Hudson, *Premature* 229).

Wyclif particularly condemned the “hierarchy” and “institutionalism” of the Church as manifest in its ranks of clergy, whom Wyclif found abominable for their laziness, greed, and immorality (Cooper 47, 50). The “Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards” states, “Oure usuel presthod, the qwich began in Rome, feynid of a power heyere than aungelis, is nout the presthod the qwich Cryst ordeynede to his apostlis. This conclusion is proud for the presthod of Rome is mad with signis, rytis and bisschopis blissingis, and that is of lital uertu” (lines 13-7). Further, as the “Twelve Conclusions” state, the false power of absolution enhances priests’ pride, yet Christians are responsible for confessing to God alone (lines 114-7). Because God alone can forgive sin, God alone “can know whether the offender is truly contrite, and contrition is the *sine qua non* for

absolution;” therefore, “sacerdotal claims to absolution” are false and blasphemous (Hudson, *Premature* 294). This Lollard reasoning similarly supported their rejection of the Church’s power of excommunication (Hudson, *Premature* 301).

Wyclif and his followers also denied the idea of transubstantiation. As Wyclif confesses:

I knowleche that the sacrament of the auter is verrey Goddus body in fourme of brede, but it is in another maner Godus body than it is in heuene... We beleue, as Crist and his apostolus han taught us, that the sacrament of the autere white and ronde, and lyke tyl oure brede... And right so as the persone of Crist is verray God and verray man... the same sacrament is verray Godus body and verraye brede, os it is forme of Goddus body and forme of brede, as techith Crist and his apostolus. (“Wyclif’s Confessions” lines 2-4, 20-2, 24-5, 26-8)

The “Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards” further states, in agreement with Wyclif’s other works, that Christian men and women may take the sacrament “of the bred withoutin oni sich miracle” (line 44).

Wyclif’s doctrine of dominion by grace further commanded condemnation by the Church. Because of his views on predestination, Wyclif concluded that “authority, whether over inanimate goods or over animate nature, depended upon the state of grace of the man wielding it; authority depended not upon the office but upon the righteousness of the man holding the office” (Hudson, *Premature* 315). Because the application of Wyclif’s beliefs regarding secular authority could have seemed to advocate for anarchy, Wyclif carefully attempted to distinguish between “dominion” and “power” as wielded by authority figures (Cooper 61). As Cooper goes on to explain, “Dominion was the

right to rule and evil men could never possess it; but power, through God's permission, could be exercised by evil men who had no true dominion just as God allowed other evils in the world" (61). In misdirected fear, Wyclif's opposition called him a social revolutionary, but this label is false. Wyclif expounded conservatively upon Christian ethics within the context of the feudal social and political structures of his time. Lollards still envisaged the traditional division of society into the three estates of nobility, clergy, and laborers, though the nature of the clergy would be much changed (Hudson, *Premature* 352). Lollards were concerned with the poverty of the members of the Church, addressed the social hierarchy of the time, clarified the true nature of authority, and condemned clerical failure. Though the Lollards, William Langland, and the various authors of the Robin Hood tales exhibited various opinions on these societal concerns, the prevalence of these issues themselves in the texts suggests that they were at the forefront of the national conscious.

As scholar J.A.F. Thomson argues, the Lollards likely played a role in effecting popular acceptance of Henry VIII's separation from the Catholic Church (249). However, Thomson also cautions that while Lollardy was still active enough before the Reformation to have some influence on the development of eventual English Protestantism, the true nature of Lollardy was too diverse and inconsistent for scholars to categorically classify and compare it with Lutheran doctrine with any confidence (250). At most, Thomson says that the Lollards' greatest contribution to the Reformation was its opposition of the ecclesiastical institution of the period (253). Lollard ideas at times foreshadowed the doctrines introduced and applied by the Reformation in the sixteenth century (Thomson 249-50). Although the heresy trials discussed by Aston prove that

Lollards “were not particularly rare birds” in the late medieval period, and Lollards and Lutherans therefore co-existed for a time, the two were not entirely congruent (*Faith*, 85). However, some reformers identified John Wyclif as the “morning star” of the Reformation; they also viewed his teachings as the essential roots that provided the tenets of the Reformation with religious respectability (Aston, “Lollardy” 220). Lollardy fertilized the soil in which the seeds of the Reformation would later grow. Furthermore, as Aston points out, Lollard writers in particular were immortalized in canonized collections of Reformation writing (“Lollardy” 219).

Because of the ambiguity of Lollard polemic and their re-appropriation during the Reformation by Lutherans, scholars still debate the nature and extent of the relationship between Lollards and Lutherans in the late medieval period. A general timeline of Lollardy as a movement, leading up to the Reformation and the transition of England from a Catholic nation to a Protestant nation, appears in Appendix B.

Lollard Influence on Popular Works

Before delving into the nature of medieval religion and popular expression, one must acknowledge several foundational truths supported by English scholars. As Aston argues, modern scholars can never know and understand the religion of the (illiterate) people because it was never directly recorded in tangible form; “deprived of the oral communications of the past, we can only see the beliefs of the illiterate refracted through the writings of the literate, whose religious understanding was professedly of a different order” (*Faith* 1). In essence, scholars must rely on deduction when attempting to understand the lower class’s understanding of religion and morality (Aston, *Faith* 2).

Scholars must begin any historical analysis with such awareness. Further, Gray begins his more specific discussion of the Robin Hood literary tradition with an additional premise:

Any attempt at a literary discussion of the Robin Hood poems and the ‘matter’ of the legend must necessarily be humble in its expectations, and must, I think, begin with a clear acknowledgement of these two problems [the literary critic’s likely aversion to seemingly undistinguished, sub-literary material and the literary historian’s inability to discuss a solid, chronological development of the tales]. Indeed, taken together, they highlight what is possibly the single most important fact about the medieval Robin Hood matter, that it was popular literature... It was certainly ‘popular’ in the usual modern sense of the word, in that evidence clearly shows that it was much liked and widely known. It is probably also that most of it was ‘popular’ in the narrower sense, in that it did not provide entertainment exclusively for ‘courtly’ audiences but for a much wider public. (5)

Further, evidence is difficult to find and use because often such popular texts’ manuscript copies simply do not survive the test of time.

Relevance of Popular Works

The examination and analysis of both elite and popular culture remains essential, though, even in light of Aston and Gray’s individual warnings. As Judy Ann Ford argues, products of popular culture are necessarily the foundation of any scholarly attempts to identify the popularity of an ideology, whether orthodox or heterodox; such popular works “provide information about that cultural construction of Christianity in a popular milieu that can be obtained in no other way” (31). Though analyzing medieval popular literature is difficult and can never be comprehensive, such a study is both valid and rich.

Ford argues that it may be possible, by examining the relationship between elite and popular culture, to better understand the perceived appeal of Lollardy, thus recognizing the potential such works have to reveal popular cognizance of Lollard ideas (21). Lollard concerns, and the concerns raised in *Piers Plowman* and the early Robin Hood tales, include literary representations of poverty, transgression of social norms, submission to divine authority, and a preoccupation with clerical failure.

Representation of Poverty

Of all estates, the Robin Hood literary tradition, *Piers Plowman*, and Wycliffite theology emphasize the significance of poverty and the importance of the poor, who figure prominently in the works of all these traditions. Helen Barr, in her article on “Wycliffite Representations of the Third Estate,” argues that Wycliffite texts idealize the status and value of members of the lower class; specifically, Wyclif praised the “praiseworthy poverty” in which the peasant laborers lived (199). Furthermore, Wyclif’s teachings on dominion, specifically that “only the just have true possession,” led to his conviction that because the just “are by definition in perfect charity, they would wish to share their goods, whether spiritual or temporal” (Hudson, *Premature* 374). Wyclif urged Christians to return “to the ‘poverty’ of Christ,” and Robin Hood’s charitable character reflects such a movement (Brown 161; Cooper 49). As in the Robin Hood literary tradition, “the idealized view of the rural poor labourer that emerges in Wycliffite texts serves as a foil against which to contrast the superfluity and corruption of the material church” (Barr, *Wycliffite* 204). As society increasingly distrusted higher classes’ claims to power and wealth, Aston argues that “the poor correspondingly gained new respect. Poverty had its own dignity” (*Faith* 16). Brown further states that “ideals which

encompassed austerity and even ‘poverty’ based on the life of Christ, pointed to attitudes which directly undercut the trappings of aristocratic living” (152). Such ideals are also illustrated in *Piers Plowman*, in which Langland clearly favors poverty and humility to combat greed and pride (Schmidt, “Introduction” xxv).

Piers Plowman extols the virtues of the poor, stating that “no one is surer of salvation, no one is more firmly rooted in religious faith, than ploughmen, shepherds, shoemakers, and poor, ordinary working people” (10.110). Piers even reminds a knight that though men may be his social inferior on Earth, they may receive more honor and happiness in Heaven than he, so he should treat them with kindness (*Piers Plowman* 6.65). In a similar situation, Reason advises the King to love his common people because they are his true treasure and “sovereign remedy in time of supreme need,” exhibiting the secular and spiritual value of the peasants (*Piers Plowman* 5.43). Later, Dame Study argues that while the clergy “jaw on endlessly on the subject of God,” the humble are the ones who truly keep Him in their hearts; Scripture corroborates this statement, later telling Will that the poor rightfully will receive the inheritance of Heaven (*Piers Plowman* 10.96, 10.106). Because of this promise, “every wise man there’s ever been praises poverty...as the best kind of life, much better, and countless times fuller of blessings than the way of life of the rich” (*Piers Plowman* 11.119). This motif of such esteem is prevalent in popular works of the period, testifying to the complex nature and social appreciation of poverty in the Middle Ages.

Robin Hood, particularly as his character evolved over the later Middle Ages and into the early modern era, embraced the dignity of his outlaw status and insecurity of living in the forest, and once the figure of Robin assumed gentry status, he shed the

trappings of his formerly noble lifestyle. Whether originally poor or wealthy, Robin's character seems to embrace the honor that accompanies poverty and a lack of stable sources of income. The author of the "Gest" states that Robin is a "prude outlaw," and reminiscent of the legends of King Arthur and his knights, Robin and his men wait for adventure before they feast, as Robin states, "To dyne I have noo lust / Till that I have som bolde baron / Or som unkouth gest" (line 5; lines 22-4). He and his men also have a code that they live by, much like the code of chivalry of knights of the medieval period ("Gest" lines 50-60). Even after King Edward invites Robin to remain at court, he eventually leaves, preferring to live in the greenwood forest with his men ("Gest" lines 1769-76). Though Robin's origins change over time, the ideal of the poor, virtuous and free of material trappings, remains unchanged.

However, Robin is not the only character in the ballads whose good character corresponds with the virtue inherent in being poor. In the various Robin-meets-his-match scenes, Robin recognizes the strong character of others, including a potter he meets along the road. In the early ballad "Robin Hood and the Potter," Little John knows of the Potter's character and is even willing to bet that no man in the group could match him (lines 25-8). After fighting and losing to the Potter, Robin even compliments him on his "god yemenrey" and truth-telling (lines 89-90). Robin Hood and the writers of the legends surrounding him recognized the worth of the members of the lower classes and the dignity they held in their positions.

Association with Rebellion

Such frequent transgression of the established order, of course, led to a prevalent association, often undeserved, with civil unrest and social revolution for the Lollards,

Piers Plowman, and Robin Hood. Following the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the upper echelons of society blamed Wyclif and his teachings and began to associate Lollardy with dissension and revolution, despite its support for the feudal system and secular authority (Barr, "Wycliffite" 197; Brown 164; Cooper 67-8; Ford 7). During the Revolt, the rebels had displayed an uncanny ability to read and categorize texts, which they then destroyed, as well as replicate and create their own texts (Justice 36, 41-2). As Steven Justice argues in *Writing and Rebellion*, the rebels attacked the "linguistic exclusion" represented by governmental and clerical use of French and Latin by issuing their own letters patent in the vernacular; in so doing, "They did not attack the assumption that authoritative action was written action. They aimed instead to make the language of record and official action identical with the language of information and everyday exchange, a language by definition open of access to those native-born" (71). Unfortunately for Wyclif, his prominent voice, which linked "the issues of wealth, law, authority, and vernacular literacy in a scheme for theological and political reform," rung true to the rebels in ways Wyclif perhaps could not have anticipated (Justice 75).

Despite being a debatably orthodox text, *Piers Plowman's* treatment further exhibits the danger of expressing suggestions for reform, no matter the agenda intended. As Justice points out, John Ball, among other revolutionaries, cited multiple examples from *Piers Plowman* in his rebellious rhetoric, displaying a deep knowledge of the text and capacity to re-interpret it for his own needs (Justice 14-5, 118). In one of his letters, Ball states, "biddeth Peres ploughman. go to his werk. and chastise wel hobbe the robbere" (qtd. in Justice 118). Justice argues, "even as [Ball] derived authority from *Piers Plowman*, Ball asserted authority over it, assimilating its language and imagery to a

practical purpose already conceived and undertaken” (118). Schmidt recognizes the possibility that following the Peasants’ Revolt, Langland was alarmed at the misapplication of his work to the support of a violent rebellion against ecclesiastical and political authority (“Introduction” xv). Like Wycliffite writings and Robin Hood ballads, *Piers Plowman* “does not advocate radical changes...in the structure of the social order. The reform it calls for is a return to the true spirit of Christian life and the traditional bonds and duties of an organic, hierarchically arranged society” (Schmidt, “Introduction” xii).

The Robin Hood legend, too, continued to receive disapproval for its encouragement of civil unrest, even carrying such a reputation well into the seventeenth century. The political and religious elite continued to hold the figure of Robin Hood up for ridicule “as an exemplar of criminal disorder” and rebellion (Holt, *Robin Hood* 147). During the earliest known years of circulation, the Robin Hood ballads appeared as broadsides. Steven Justice argues that this mode of publication “provoked the anxieties of church and state and often heralded collective trouble” (29). Justice then goes on to argue that, because the earliest broadsides are “traceable to the activities of Wyclif and his followers, broadside publication of vernacular reformist theology formed a part of the cultural project” of Lollardy (77). Justice suggests that Wyclif used broadsides in particular to “de-latinize” doctrinal discussion, instead using a language belonging to the public (79). Any use of broadsides, whether for theological critique or popular balladry:

...was a polemical gesture that asserted the rights of the laity to the intellectual, and to the material, goods of the institutional church... The broadside (itself an example of unrestricted discussion) enacted what it advocated and also purveyed

the materials and examples that would enable such discussion. It contentiously announced the beginnings of lay literacy, in the deepest and (for a medieval audience) most paradoxical sense of the phrase: *literacy*, meaning not just that laypeople could read and write, but that they could maneuver and manipulate the bookish resources of intellectual culture; and *lay literacy*, meaning not just that laypeople could ape clerics, but that precisely *as* laypeople they would take a rightful and informed place in the discussion of churchly and national issues.

(Justice 79-80)

Scholar Wendy Scase notices a similar phenomenon in the period following the Peasants' Revolt in her article "'Strange and Wonderful Bills': Bill-Casting and Political Discourse in Late Medieval England." In this article, Scase discusses the "Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards" and their posting on the doors of Westminster Hall, arguing that it created a space to which lower estates had access and could collectively present their own grievances and seek redress (241). As these scholars' works suggest, the laity was beginning to assert its voice in national political, religious, and social discourse through the written word.

Though feared by authority figures as subversive, Robin Hood's loyalties and repeated agendas as well as those of Wyclif's followers show continual reverence for the secular system in place, particularly the monarchy. Both traditions are critical of more specific people and positions rather than of the system as a whole. The tales, set against a realistic background, position themselves against monastic wealth and corrupt local authority. No tale more explicitly illustrates this contention than the "Gest," in which the outlaws' code declares that they shall "bete and bynde" members of the clergy and

always remember the offenses of the “sherif” (lines 57-60). Later in the tale, a “ryche abbot” conspires with “the justyce of Englonde” to rob the knight of his inheritance (“Gest” lines 215, 369-80). The justice himself admits that he is “holde with the abbot . . . both with cloth and fee,” directly linking corrupt municipalities and clerics (“Gest” lines 425-6). Despite critiquing such corruption, these tales do not outline a program of reform, and they avoid refuting all forms of authority, particularly out of reverence for the King, though they do kill plenty of religious figures throughout the legend (Holt, *Robin Hood* 198). In addition, R.H. Hilton also argues that the “rebellious outlook” of the Robin Hood legends “was one of protest against immediately felt hardship. It was not critical of the established order” (209).

Similarly, Wyclif and his followers, urging obedience to secular authority, taught that Christian codes of conduct applied within the superseding structure of the tri-partite feudal system (Barr, “Wycliffite” 197; Cooper 68). Robin Hood, Piers Plowman, and John Wyclif submitted to the structure of government and hierarchy already present in society. In fact, though occasional restlessness and rebellion surfaced, the only comprehensible social and political model of order remained that of hierarchy (Cantor 99). A certain degree of individualism had begun to infuse national thought, but that thought was still hierarchically vertical (Cantor 99). Neither Wycliffite texts nor the legends of Robin Hood call explicitly for any subversion of national secular authority, yet both contain representations and morals that, in full application, would seem to call for a re-configuration of English society (Barr, “Wycliffite” 214-5). However, Lollardy was a fundamentalist movement, and as such it is inherently, highly conservative. Both

traditions contain traces of rebellious polemic while simultaneously attempting to diffuse radical behavior.

Doctrine of Dominion by Grace

Further qualifying Cantor's assertions, Keen argues that as tumultuous as the Middle Ages were, the English people sought to maintain the overall structure of their society:

For them all authority was in the end derived from God; the ultimate validity of the law was therefore upheld by divine sanction. In an age of faith this made for a stubborn conservatism in social thinking. Ancient usage and the established order of things, hallowed by time, were sacrosanct; custom had the force of law. (7)

Again, neither Wyclif and his followers, nor the fictional Robin Hood and his band, sought to overthrow the system, merely the unworthy filling positions of authority. As Hudson points out, "only a man in a state of righteousness can truly be said to have authority, whether over inanimate objects or over animate nature" ("Introduction" 4). The application of this doctrine meant that "temporal rulers possessing grace would be permitted to have power over spiritual ones who lacked it" (Ford 6). Cooper argues that Wyclif's theory of dominion and perception of political relationships reflected a feudal perspective, again indicating the allegiance Lollards showed to the powers that were (60). Furthermore, Wyclif advocates for the separation of secular and spiritual authority: "no preste mai haue no maner worldly power bot all spirituele powere" ("Church and State" lines 4-6). The "Twelve Conclusions" echo this idea: "temperelte and spirituelte ben to partys of holi chirche, and therefore he that hath takin him to the ton schulde nout medlin

him with the tothir, *quia nemo potest duobus dominis seruire* [for no one can serve two masters]” (lines 65-7).

Robin Hood’s repeatedly shown reverence for his king reflects Lollards’ allegiance to Wyclif’s doctrine of dominion by grace. In fact, like Robin’s character throughout the tradition, Wyclif’s “chief hope of reform in the church” rested in the power of the king and his nobles (Hudson, *Premature* 362). In “Monk,” the King himself recognizes and extols Robin’s leadership, saying “For sothe soch a yeman as he is on / In all Ingland ar not thre” (lines 343-6). When Little John and Much come before the King, they kneel before him and swear their loyalty (lines 211-2, 215). The King knows that Robin and his men, though operating outside of the law, are loyal to him and his divine authority. In the “Gest,” Robin declares his love for and loyalty to the King even more explicitly. Unaware of the King’s identity, Robin declares, “I love no man in all the worlde / So well as I do my kyng” (lines 1541-2). A similar relationship appears in “Adam Bell;” after William proves his skill at archery, the King and Queen both take the three outlaws into their service, appointing them to high positions in the King’s direct service (lines 652-79).

Langland also idealizes the figure of the King and the allegiance due him by his subjects throughout the text of *Piers Plowman*. The King vows to battle and kill Falseness, Deceit, and Guile, and he listens to the arguments of Conscience and Reason (*Piers Plowman* 2.20, 4.35). Also, unlike members of the clergy discussed later, the King is resistant to financial pressure and bribery (*Piers Plowman* 4.37). Furthermore, like the King and other figures of authority in the Robin Hood tradition, the King recognizes the frailty of Law and swears to uphold Justice (*Piers Plowman* 4.40-1). Such a distinction

between Law and Justice is demonstrated repeatedly in both *Piers Plowman* and the Robin Hood works.

Concerns with Clerical Failure

Both Robin Hood and Lollards felt differently about the clergy than they did about the monarchy, however. Though not critical of Christianity itself, Lollards were highly critical of the clergy. Such a concern with clerical failure is also present throughout the Robin Hood literary tradition. In fact, Davis argues that “Robin’s piety and reverence for his religion in fact highlight the role of the ‘religious’ as the villains of the story” (127). Even texts intended to be orthodox like *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* critiqued the members of the clergy. As Schmidt suggests, Langland argues that the clergy “are the root cause of the good as well as the evil in the whole community. Their holiness makes it holy, their viciousness makes it vicious, because lay-people understand their teaching *through* their example” (“Introduction” xxii). Brown recognizes that as clergy rose in prestige during the later medieval period, a gap appeared between expectations of the clergy and reality, and lay people began to complain of priestly inadequacy more and more (96; Ford 68). Such widespread disapproval of the members of the clergy thus appears throughout contemporary discussions both educated and popular in nature. Wyclif himself condemned the establishment of monastic institutions because then the monks acquired wealth and “fell away from the vital inspiration of the founders and became instruments of the fiend rather than of God” (Cooper 47). Wyclif and his successors used brutal language to denounce the men of the clergy and attack their personal sins (Cooper 50-2). The “Twelve Conclusions” declare that “it is ful vncouth to manye that ben wise to se bisschopis pleye

with the Holi Gost in makyng of here ordris, for thei geuen crownis in caracteris in stede of whyte hartys, and that is the leueree of antecryst brout into holy chirche to colour ydilnesse” (lines 21-4).

Robin Hood and his men often specifically target members of the clergy for robbery and worse, and such men are repeatedly cast as villains in the ballads and plays. In fact, in the outlaws’ oath outlined in the “Gest,” Little John explicitly states, “These bisshoppes and these archebishoppes / Ye shall them bete and bynde” (lines 57-8). Throughout the literary legend, members of the clergy betray Robin, leading to his arrest and sometimes even death. In one of the earliest Robin Hood ballads, “Robin Hood and the Monk,” a monk betrays Robin to the sheriff despite Robin’s piety and religious devotion (lines 75-86). In the “Gest,” the Abbot and others conspire to keep the lands and wealth of the poor knight (lines 341-452), and a Prioress eventually causes Robin’s death (lines 1803-12).

In a similar fashion, *Piers Plowman* criticizes the clergy for their greed. Scripture speaks of bishops who withhold “the treasures of Christ from the poor man at his door” and who “squander wealth that should feed the poor,” even referring to such clerics as a type of Judas (*Piers Plowman* 9.90). The figure of Anima later also critiques friars and other theologians for their incomprehensible manner of preaching, arguing that they “undermine the faith of the ordinary man” (*Piers Plowman* 15.168). Such concerns, in addition to the repeated association of the clergy with deceit, mirror the zealous condemnations of Wyclif and his followers.

Tension between Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Popular Works

Analyzing the earliest Robin Hood ballads, R.H. Hilton identifies “abundant reference to the hard realities of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century secular existence, and only the most conventional references to religion” (198). Such a continuous characteristic throughout the tradition renders the tales adaptable to varying contributors’ whims and agendas. When considered in comparison with other popular works of the period, the authors of the Robin Hood tradition seem to comment on prevalent social concerns in a manner similar to the authors of those other popular works, including Lollard writers and William Langland. Analyzing John Mirk’s *Festial*, an orthodox collection of sermons, Ford identifies such ambiguity of opinion and doctrinal association. Above all, however, one must remember that Mirk’s *Festial* was unique from both orthodox and Lollard texts, much like the Robin Hood ballads and other literature, which originated before the time of John Wyclif (Ford 54, 60). Mirk’s sermons draw on both orthodox and Lollard imagery and representations of key figures (54). Like the legends of Robin Hood, “the *Festial* is in no way a rebel text; it advocates the acceptance of established political authority as much as it supports the orthodox church. Yet the degree and intensity of agreement with rebel causes expressed in such an orthodox text is astounding,” and typically such apparent agreement garnered speculation and ridicule (Ford 71). Further, the *Festial* expresses, if anything, more sympathy for the poor than even some Lollard texts (Ford 79), and both parties recognized the radical potential that needed to be restrained from “bursting forth into rebellion against legitimately constituted secular lordship” (Ford 85). Mirk sought to accomplish this restraint “by providing an avenue of vernacularity, lay agency, and participatory ecclesiology” (Ford 143).

Mirk's *Festial*'s many similarities with Lollardy serve two purposes. First, they illustrate that Wyclif's teachings were not so diametrically opposed to the doctrines of the established Church. Second, the ease Mirk shows in utilizing both imagery and language normally associated with either orthodox or Lollard texts proves that other texts, specifically popular ballads and plays, could do the same by falling under multiple, dynamic contributors. Such is the history of the Robin Hood literary tradition. So, too, is the fate of the *Piers Plowman* literary tradition, as "*Piers* also became entangled in religious controversy. Although there were owners, annotators and compilers of *Piers* who saw in it material to uphold the true Catholic Church... the poem was also appropriated to endorse opinion compatible with Lollard ideas" (Barr, "Introduction" 5).

Even popular literature exposed the religious and social tensions present between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in English culture during the Middle Ages and leading up to the Reformation. As social classifications changed and literacy increased, the lower classes' awareness of their political voice increased too (Barr, "Introduction" 3). Barr argues that "all the poems in the *Piers* legacy bear witness to the emergent voice of those literate members of society who may have been excluded from key positions of sacred or secular authority, but who were keen in this time of flux and unrest that their voices be heard" ("Introduction" 7). Because of this phenomenon, figures and institutions of authority faced challenges and calls for reform (Barr, "Introduction" 1). However, such calls for reform were not always from enemies, though at times challenges also came from revolutionaries. Orthodox members of the Catholic community in the late Middle Ages, for example, were at times as critical of the clergy as the Church's opponents were, yet these fellow Catholics sought the betterment of their Church rather than its removal.

People's and group's intentions for reform distinguished supporters from opponents, not the act of criticism itself. However, this period of English history gave rise to "a religious climate which increasingly branded reform as heresy" (Barr, "Introduction" 5).

The presence of moral and religious debate in popular works like the Robin Hood and *Piers Plowman* traditions is evident in late medieval England and into the early modern period. Specifically, the influence of Lollardy as it originated from the works of John Wyclif is clear in even the more common national consciousness. While Robin Hood texts do not advocate expressly for social revolution or heresy, the ideals and motifs utilized by both orthodox and Lollard adherents appear throughout the history of the legend, at least in its written form. Popular works like *Piers Plowman* and the Robin Hood literary tradition offered the lower classes "a new language of reformist and theologically informed legislation" (Justice 131). Such a presence in the popular culture of the time attests to the power that Lollard thought held in the centuries leading up to the Reformation. The Lollard movement, as well as forms of popular expression like the Robin Hood literary tradition and *Piers Plowman*, was part of a larger socio-religious movement of the period. The authors of these key popular works of the period seem to have utilized similar tactics to one another in commenting on prevalent social concerns of the late Middle Ages, exhibiting a social phenomenon: multiple levels of society began to recognize and fight for the capacity and freedom to engage in religious and political discourse.

APPENDIX A

Timeline of the Robin Hood and Piers Plowman Literary Traditions¹

- c. 1350-70 Estimated composition of “The Tale of Gamelyn”
- c. 1370 *Piers Plowman* A-text
- c. 1379 *Piers Plowman* B-text
- c. 1385-86 *Piers Plowman* C-text
- c. 1432 Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough, and William of Cloudesley appear on Parliament’s Roll of outlaws
- c. 1450 Earliest manuscript of “Robin Hood and the Monk” (or 1461)
Estimated composition date of “A Gest of Robyn Hode”
Earliest copy of “Robyn and Gandelyn”
- c. 1470 Estimated composition of “Robyn Hod and the Shryff of Notyngham”
- c. 1500 Only surviving manuscript of “Robin Hood and the Potter”
- 1534 Henry VIII becomes the head of the Church of England. (*Tales published beyond this date are not the focus of this argument.*)

¹ Knight and Ohlgren

APPENDIX B

Timeline of the Lollard Movement and Other Historical Events²

1337	Hundred Years War begins
1348-49	Black Death/Great Plague
1354	Wyclif goes to Oxford (c. 1354)
1361-62	Plague returns
1369	Plague returns
1370	Wyclif begins teaching on theology
1377	Accession of Richard II Pope Gregory condemns various propositions of Wyclif's teachings
1378	Attempts to procure Wyclif's condemnation in England unsuccessful Composition of <i>De Veritate Sacre Scripture, De Ecclesia</i> Great/Papal Schism
1379	Composition of <i>De Officio Regis, De Potestate Pape, De Eucharistia</i>
1381	Peasants' Revolt Wyclif retires
1382	Blackfriars Council in London condemns 10 of Wyclif's propositions as heretical Composition of <i>Triologus</i> Edicts written against Wyclif's writings and followers
1384	Composition of <i>Opus Evangelicum</i> Death of Wyclif
1395	<i>Twelve Conclusions of Lollards</i> displayed on doors of Westminster Hall
1399	Death of John of Gaunt Deposition of Richard II Accession of Henry IV
1401	Enactment of statute <i>De Haeretico Comburendo</i>
1413-14	Accession of Henry V Oldcastle Rising
1417	Execution of Sir John Oldcastle
1422	Accession of Henry VI

- 1431 Lollards implicated in popular rising
- 1453 Hundreds Years War ends
- 1455 War of the Roses begins
- 1461 Edward IV defeats Lancastrians, becomes King
- 1470 Henry VI restored as King
- 1471 Edward IV restored as King
- 1476 William Caxton's printing press set up at Westminster
- 1483 Accession of Edward V, deposed and killed
Richard III becomes King
- 1485 Henry Tudor defeats and kills Richard III
- 1486 Henry VII (Tudor) marries Elizabeth of York, uniting the Lancasters and
Yorks
- 1509 Accession of Henry VIII
- 1517 The Protestant Reformation begins
- 1529 Henry VIII summons the "Reformation Parliament" to cut ties with Roman
Church
- 1534 Act of Supremacy declares Henry VIII the Supreme Head of the Church of
England
- 1536 Dissolution of monasteries begins under Thomas Cromwell
- 1547 Accession of Edward VI
- 1553 Accession of Mary I
Restoration of Roman Catholicism (through 1555)
- 1558 Accession of Elizabeth I
Catholic legislation repealed
- 1563 Establishment of the Anglican Church completed

² Schmidt, "Chronology" xlv-xlv; Barr, "Chronology" 57-58; Hudson, "List" ix-x; "Timeline of Medieval;"
"Timeline of the Reformation"

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ⁱ Knight and Ohlgren argue that by 1417 the literature began to incorporate the character of Friar Tuck, as a chaplain in Sussex began a career of robbery under this alias (458). Similar characters and figures, and thus possible sources, appear between 1470 and 1560 (458). The garland from which pieces are used to fill out the manuscript ballad of CF is from 1663.

ABSTRACT

The Robin Hood literary tradition is the central text of this discussion, though other texts, like *Piers Plowman*, serve as supplementary examples that situate the Robin Hood legend within its contemporary context. The Robin Hood texts were a part of a larger social, political, and religious movement in England in the later medieval period. The heterodox Lollard movement, originated by the teachings and writings of John Wyclif, also played a role in the social friction that arose in late medieval English society. Comparison of the Robin Hood literary tradition with Lollard polemic and the literary tradition of *Piers Plowman* reveals the possibility that the various authors of the Robin Hood tales sought to comment on the prevalent social concerns of the period. Though the Lollards, William Langland, and the various authors of the Robin Hood tales that were soon to appear in print at times exhibited various opinions on social concerns like poverty, social hierarchy, authority, and clerical failure, the prevalence of these issues themselves in the texts suggests that they were perhaps at the forefront of the national conscience.

This thesis first examines the Robin Hood literary tradition as it had developed until 1534, when the Act of Supremacy established King Henry VIII as the head of the Church of England. Next, this discussion introduces *Piers Plowman*, a popular text of the Middle Ages, as well as a selection of Lollard texts and themes. A cross-examination of the concerns of Lollard polemic with the Robin Hood literary tradition and other popular texts of the period concludes this thesis. This literary comparison essentially suggests that popular audiences were increasingly voicing their comments on socio-political matters of the time and thus establishing their presence and agency in public matters.