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Q Culture

Robin Hood — queen of thieves

by Dan Van Mourik
Q-Notes Staff

LONDON, ENGLAND—Robin Hood has been portrayed through the years as a swash-buckling hero — by such notable actors as Errol Flynn, Sean Connery and Kevin Costner — who robs from the rich and gives to the poor. But according to two professors, rather than king of thieves, the outlaw was more likely queen. Perhaps Mel Brooks was closer to the truth in his movie *Robin Hood: Men In Tights*.

Stephen Knight, professor of English literature at Cardiff University, believes Robin preferred his "merrie men" to Maid Marian. He decided Robin was gay after studying 14th century ballads, the earliest known accounts of his deeds, which detail his relationships with his men, especially Little John and Will Scarlet.

"The ballads could not say outright that he was gay because of the prevailing moral climate, but they do contain a great deal of erotic imagery," he said. "The green wood itself is a symbol of virility and the references to arrows, quivers and swords make it clear too," he told London's *Sunday Times*.

He said the ballads showed that Maid Marian — described as Robin's true love — never existed. Knight thinks her name was added by 16th-century authors who wanted the tale of the outlaw to be more respectable to heterosexual readers. Little John, not Maid Marian, was more likely Robin's true love.

His theory won backing from Barry Dobson, professor of medieval history at the University of Cambridge. "In the 12th century, homosexuality was accepted, but in the 13th the church became much less tolerant and such people were driven underground," he said.

Robin has been portrayed as an aristocrat who became an outlaw after his lands were confiscated by King John in the 1190s. He fights

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against the unjust king, robbing the rich to give to the poor. He is rehabilitated when Richard Lionheart, the rightful king, returns from the Crusades and makes Robin the first Earl of Huntingdon, a title that still exists today.

The ballads, however, suggest the real Robin came from yeoman or peasant stock, that he roamed Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire in the late 13th or 14th century and that his popularity came not from giving away money but from his ability to flout authority.

Written in Chaucerian English, made more complex by a strong dialect, one ballad's translation includes the verse: "When Robin Hood was about 20 years old; he happen'd to meet Little John; A jolly brisk blade right fit for the trade, for he was a lusty young man."

One of the earliest works, "Robin Hood and the Monk," describes the intimate friendship between Robin and Little John. It depicts them having a row over money that Knight describes as "almost domestic." Similar themes are explored in "Robin Hood and Guy of Gisbourne" — again Robin and Little John have a falling out but are reunited.

Some historians believe that Robin was a genuine character, but that ballads have been embellished with the exploits of other outlaw gangs, among many of which homosexuality would also have been common.

The reassessment of one of Britain's greatest folk heroes was greeted by gay activists as a welcome — if belated — outing. But the Robin Hood Society said the claims were damaging to one of the great role models for children.

Peter Tatchell of the gay rights group Outrage was delighted by the new academic speculation: "His lifestyle alone was enough to provoke speculation. It's about time school history lessons acknowledged the contribution of famous homosexuals."

But Mary Chamberlain of the Robin Hood Society was outraged: "Robin remains a highly regarded figure the world over and children like to play at being Robin Hood. These claims could do a lot of damage."

Whether Costner got it right in *Robin Hood: King of Thieves* or Brooks did in *Robin Hood: Men In Tights*, Robin will always be a swash-buckling hero, to many a gay man. ▼

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