

## Close Reading

Throughout the Robin Hood tradition, the physically strong and beautiful are lauded and allowed to act as they please, while those who have any form of disability are either made out to be the villain, are hardly mentioned, or are scorned. The ballad *Robin Hood's Fishing* provides an example of how physical disabilities, specifically limb injuries, would have been a severe challenge with regard to medieval transportation and were even harshly mocked.

The ballad opens with Robin Hood in the Greenwood, with Robin bemoaning that he is “weary of the woods” (Knight 583). Herein lies problem number one. In the vast majority of the Robin Hood tradition, the setting of the ballads is the forest, where the outlaws can be free from persecution of the townspeople. If the Greenwood is equivalent to freedom, then what happens to those who do not have access to it due to a physical disability such as a leg injury? Where is their place of refuge? Unlike Robin’s “weight men all” (Knight 583), who are physically able to join Robin in the woods, those with disabilities are forced to make their existence within the community and adapt to societal norms as much as they can. In order for anyone to make a living within the community, travel will more likely than not be involved.

The standard methods of travel in the medieval era were either by foot or on horseback. If a person was incapable of one of those two, they were forced to remain in a central location unless they had aid from another individual. The ballad makes no mention of travel by land, simply stating that Robin “took his leave” of his men and “took up his inn” with a widow (Knight 583). The lack of mention of a horse suggests that Robin walked to Scarborough, however his method of travel is not explicitly stated. In addition, the ballad does not conclude with Robin going back to the Greenwood, rather ending with him stating, “If Robin Hood com

once on shore, / Hee com no more upon the se[a]" (Knight 588). This leaves the only known transportation vessel in the ballad to be a boat—more specifically a fishing boat.

When one thinks of fishing as an occupation, the general assumption is that the fisherman is able to move about his vessel with ease and confidence and is able to handle the necessary equipment of the trade. The first step of this is being able to climb aboard the boat, and from there move around the deck. However, for the disabled, this might be virtually impossible. In addition, the struggle that water transportation creates then could become a source of mockery toward the individual. Lines 51-52 and the succeeding two stanzas of the ballad show Robin's inability to fish while disguised as "Symon of the Lee", and the resulting consequences. The ballad states that "Symon lobb'd in his lines twaine / But neither got great nor smaw" (Knight 584), and then goes on to describe how the other men on the boat scorned him because of his lack of skills. The context of the circumstances provides more detail of why Robin could not fish (mainly his laziness), however the point remains that Robin was mocked for his failure to physically perform according to the standards of those around him.

Robin is further mocked for his physical weakness in lines 89-90, when he "staggered to the hatches high, / Never a foot that he could stand" (Knight 586). The captain of the boat spends four whole lines of the ballad criticizing Robin, calling him a "long lubber", or clumsy landsman as the margin notes clarify. Only once they tie Robin to the mast to steady him do the other fishermen take him seriously.

In conclusion, the problems presented by sea travel and trades in the medieval period offer little to no recourse for those with limb disabilities. Individuals who cannot travel by foot or by horse are forced to either stay in one location their whole lives or adapt to a difficult life at sea. The challenges of this life were often not recognized, and were even largely ridiculed. Thus,

the ballad *Robin Hood's Fishing* provides readers with a clear example of the difficulties that those with physical disabilities faced during that time, and even to this day.

## Works Cited

Knight, Stephen Thomas, and Thomas H. Ohlgren, editors. "Robin Hood's Fishing." *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2000, pp. 581–588. TEAMS Middle English Texts Series.