

Popular TV programming, class-warfare, and the ambiguity of morality

I was thinking about TV programs that I liked over the years and recalled that as a child I watched, first in England and then in Australia, 'The Adventures of Robin Hood' starring Richard Greene. It would start with this figure in funny-looking leotards firing an arrow into the bole of a tree; then the titles and music would follow.

This series was probably inspired by the actual legend of Robin Hood and then by the famous Hollywood movie starring Errol Flynn. What were all those guys in tights and funny green clothes doing in the forest? Why were they so merry?

The story was also later filmed as 'Robin and Marian', with Sean Connery as a crusty Robin and Audrey Hepburn as Maid Marian, with the magnificent over the top Robert Shaw as the Sheriff of Nottingham. I think Nicol Williamson played Little John. Good stuff.

The idea of the half-hour series, which ran for years in the sixties, is encapsulated by a song, which only true nerds of legendary TV know out by heart, and will sing out loud if you but merely look in their direction. Here is the start of the song:

'Robin Hood, Robin Hood, riding through the glen
Robin Hood, Robin Hood, with his band of men
Feared by the bad, loved by the good
Robin Hood, Robin Hood, Robin Hood.'

It also had the changed third line in the repeated chorus:

'He steals from the rich, gives to the poor/Robin Hood, Robin Hood, Robin Hood.'

Now it occurs to me (an unoriginal insight I am sure), that this very early Saxon myth of stealing from the rich (usually Normans or Saxons collaborating with the conquering Normans and growing fat on their leavings) to give to the poor, is an example of a tendency in human history to consider the rich as somehow vile and the poor as somehow virtuous. If you are poor you have your virtue to cling to; the wealthy have far more choices.

Robin Hood was actually engaged in class-warfare and the redistribution of wealth. If alive today, he would be a class-warrior, a Marxist-Leninist of the first order, who would also be pretty good with a bow and arrow while trying to hit on naive girls called 'Marian' who are easily impressed by rhetoric and a 'let's make the world a better place' aspiration.

Maybe stealing from the rich to give to the poor is not actually stealing. It is a form of progressive taxation. Or if you want to be vulgar about it, consider this: if you are wealthy, you must have taken more than your fair share (that's stealing); so taking it from you and giving it to the poor is not stealing; it is a just rebalancing of the economic order. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury – you must free Robin and bugger what the judge thinks!

But what if most rich are good, hard-working capitalists with a sense of noblesse-oblige? What if the poor that Robin supposedly helped, were a bunch of layabout Saxon louts? Besides, Robin Hood himself would have been skimming a fair bit off the top for expenses; bow-strings, metal tools, rope, lots of mead (they were 'merry men' for a reason).

Think of it as a commission if you like. You cannot run a revolution (or villainy) on a shoe-string. And what are the masses of poor and the occasional fat Norman wandering into the forest for, but to serve the greater good of the revolution, which in the end will help them (if they live that long)?

I prefer to think of Robin Hood and his Merry Men as stealing only from the unworthy rich and giving their wealth (sans commission) to thoroughly decent Saxon chaps and chapettes who just need an opportunity to make some small investment into bettering their future. Society will benefit over all. The wealthy who are good already give up some of their wealth in some way (charity, taxation); from the bad we can take (steal). Ladies and gentlemen of the jury – this man Robin deserves only to do community service for his petty crimes.

Who would have thought so much political theory and historical allusion is to be found in a simple folk tale and TV series for kids who don't want to do their homework?

Here is the complete set of lines for those of you interested – all in all it is a great, lusty, drinking song, where you are singing your heart out and engaging in class-warfare at the same time:

Robin Hood, Robin Hood, riding through the glen
Robin Hood, Robin Hood, with his band of men
Feared by the bad, loved by the good
Robin Hood, Robin Hood, Robin Hood

He called the greatest archers to a tavern on the green
They vowed to help the people of the King
They handled all the trouble on the English country scene
And still found plenty of time to sing

He came to Sherwood Forest with a feather in his cap
A fighter never looking for a fight
His bow was always ready and he kept his arrows sharp
He used them to fight for what was right

Repeat as chorus

Robin Hood, Robin Hood, riding through the glen
Robin Hood, Robin Hood, with his band of men
Feared by the bad, loved by the good (or substitute: He steals from the rich, gives to the poor)
Robin Hood, Robin Hood, Robin Hood

Pass the mead!