

# A Guide to *Sherwood: The Adventures of Robin Hood* by Ken Ludwig

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for OpenStage Theatre & Company

## A Note from the Dramaturg

This guide is intended to help you better understand the world of *Sherwood*, including many of the characters and historical references in the play. I've included a glossary of specialized vocabulary, a description of how the legend of Robin Hood came to exist in its current form, a selection of characters, and a summary of the larger historical context. I've also included a list of sources if you feel like learning more. With luck, this additional information will make your experience of Robin's greenwood home even richer.

## About the Author

Ken Ludwig has had six shows on Broadway and seven in London's West End, and many of his works have become a standard part of the American repertoire. *Lend Me a Tenor* won two Tony Awards and was called "one of the classic comedies of the 20th century" by *The Washington Post*. *Crazy For You* was on Broadway for five years and won the Tony and Olivier Awards for Best Musical. In addition, he has won two Olivier Awards (England's highest theater honor), two Helen Hayes Awards, the Edgar Award for Best Mystery of the Year, and the Edwin Forrest Award for Contributions to the American Theater. His other plays include *Moon Over Buffalo* (starring Carol Burnett), *Twentieth Century* (starring Alec Baldwin), *Be My Baby* (starring Hal Holbrook), *Baskerville*, *A Comedy of Tenors*, *Shakespeare in Hollywood*, *A Fox on the Fairway*, *Leading Ladies*, and a stage version of *Murder on the Orient Express* written expressly at the request of the Agatha Christie Estate. His newest play, *Dear Jack, Dear Louise*, which tells the story of his parents' courtship during World War II, won the 2020 Helen Hayes / MacArthur Award for Best New Play or Musical. His book *How To Teach Your Children Shakespeare*, published by Penguin Random House, won the Falstaff Award for Best Shakespeare Book of the Year, and his essays are published by the Yale Review. His work has been performed in over thirty countries in more than twenty languages, and his plays are produced throughout the United States every night of the year. You can find out more about Ken Ludwig and his work at [www.kenludwig.com](http://www.kenludwig.com)



## About the Play

*Sherwood* is one of a series of literary classics Ludwig has adapted for stage, a series that includes *Treasure Island*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, and more. The story is a retelling of the legends of Robin Hood and his Merry Men, which have been entertaining audiences for at least the last seven hundred years. Updated for a modern audience, this play adopts many of the elements added to the story in recent retellings, including a capable and proto-feminist Maid Marian and a borderline democratic-socialist Robin Hood.

# Glossary

## Baron

*/ˈberən/* a member of the lowest order of the nobility, usually with the title of “lord”

## Catechism

*/ˈkədəˌkizəm/* a list of religious principles, usually recited as a series of questions and answers

## Crusade

*/krʊˈsād/* one of a series of medieval European military expeditions to the Holy Land

## Earl

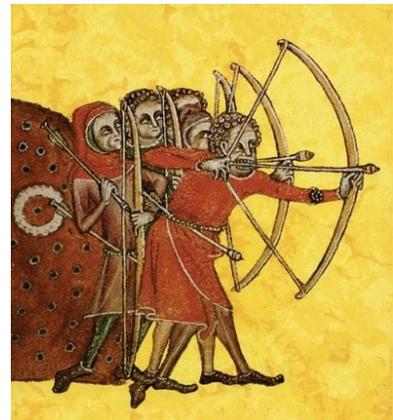
*/ˈɛr(ə)/* from the Old English *eorl*, meaning "warrior-chieftain," a mid-ranking nobleman

## Friar

*/ˈfri(ə)r/* a member of the four mendicant orders (Augustinians, Carmelites, Dominicans, and Franciscans) who dedicate their lives to voluntary poverty and preaching

## Longbow

*/ˈlɒŋˌbɔʊ/* a tall bow (usually about six feet) bow usually cut from the English yew tree and used by the English and Welsh for hunting and warfare; especially valued for its ability to penetrate armor from long distances



## Magyar

*/ˈmɑːɡjər/* a member of a nomadic people from the Urals who migrated westward to Hungary in the early Middle Ages (ca. 9th c.)

## Noble

*/ˈnɒbəl/* used as either an adjective or noun to describe a member of the landowning aristocracy; the ranks of English nobility from highest to lowest are duke, marquess, earl, viscount, and baron

## Norman

*/ˈnɔːrmən/* a resident of Normandy, descended from Franks and Scandinavian settlers; the Normans conquered England in 1066, establishing Norman aristocratic lordship over England

## Quarterstaff

*/ˈkwɔːrdər stɑːf/* a traditional pole weapon, usually between six and nine feet long, also called the “short staff” to distinguish it from the much longer pike; a common weapon among peasants and artisans, who were not permitted to carry swords

## Saracen

*/ˈserəsən/* a perjorative medieval European term for a Muslim, usually of Arab descent, especially in the context of the Crusades

## Saxon

*/ˈsaksən/* member of a Germanic people who migrated to England in the early Middle Ages; under Norman rule, the term Saxon is used for anyone not a member of the Norman aristocracy (special note: in the modern era, the term “Anglo-Saxon” has been misappropriated to denote medieval European “whiteness,” an idea that’s been pretty roundly refuted by medievalists who’ve identified significant numbers of people of Middle Eastern and African descent in England from the Roman era onward; historians are beginning to move away from this term in favor of “Old English” or “Englisc”)

## Seneschal

*/ˈsenəSH(ə)/* the steward of a noble house, charged with overseeing the daily running of the house and its estates

## Sheriff

*/ˈSHerɪf/* from the Old English “reeve,” an official responsible for overseeing a manor; after the Norman Conquest, an official appointed from the peasantry and assigned as a local tax-collector and royal magistrate in a shire, an administrative unit similar to a county

## Sir

*/sɜːr/* a title used before the given name of a knight, the lowest rank of the aristocracy

## Yeoman

*/ˈyōmən/* a free peasant (as opposed to an unfree serf) or a member of the artisan class

# The Legend of Robin Hood

“Many a man speaks of Robin Hood that never bent his bow.” — English proverb

The legend of Robin Hood, unlike King Arthur (who was the subject of some poetry produced on the Continent), is an entirely English invention. It's also not without controversy. Robin Hood stories were among the most popular in the late Middle Ages and Tudor era, but critics often contrasted love of these legends with a lax religious devotion. The earliest extant text on Robin Hood dates from a manuscript produced around 1450, but there's a cheeky reference to the “rhymes of Robin Hood” in the thirteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman*:

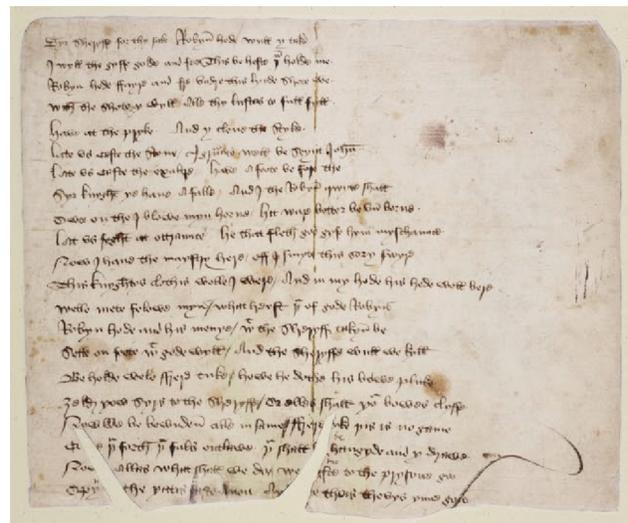
I kan noght parfityly my Paternoster as the preest it syngeth,  
But I kan rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre.

(I don't really know the Our Father when the priest sings it,  
But I know the rhymes of Robin Hood and Randolph, Earl of Chester.)

And sixteenth-century Biblical scholar William Tyndale declared that they were, “as filthy as heart can think to corrupt the minds of youth.” So why were these stories so popular?

Odds are, Robin Hood's popularity in the Tudor era and beyond depended on two things: his allegiance to the lower classes and his unflinching loyalty to the king. English audiences were fine with watching bishops and nobles get robbed in the greenwood by this time, but Robin's devotion to his king (and his lady) let audiences feel comfortable with his chivalric brand of orderly lawlessness.

Late fifteenth-century sources like *Robin Hood and the Monk* and *A Gest of Robyn Hode* include most of the now-familiar elements of the outlaw Robin and his band of Merry Men. In the earliest sources, Robin is already devoted to the poor, an exceptionally skilled archer, and an enemy of the wealthy members of the church, the nobility, and the Sheriff of Nottingham, and Little John, Will Scathelocke (later “Scarlet”), and Much the Miller's Son already exist. However, the Merry Men are definitely a band of robbers, and their names become synonymous in popular culture with crime and disorder. A 1439 petition to Parliament describes a criminal who:



having no liflode, ne suffeante of goodes, gadered and assembled unto him many misdoers, beyng of his clothyng, and, in manere of insurrection, wente into the wodes in that countrie, like as it hadde be Robyn Hude and his meyne.

(having no livelihood and poor in goods, gathered and assembled to himself many criminals, being of his own status, and, in the manner of insurrection, went into the woods in that country, like Robin Hood and his men.)

Perhaps because he unsettled the powers-that-be, Robin Hood was also, from his earliest days, a popular subject for plays. The earliest example of a play about Robin Hood is *Robyn Hod and the Shryff off Notyngnam*, which dates from 1475 and features the first known appearance of Friar Tuck (“ffrere Tuke”). Since in the earlier poems Robin tends to target wealthy churchmen, it’s possible that the addition of Friar Tuck in the late fifteenth-century was meant to soften Robin’s anticlericalism, letting storytellers pit a virtuous Franciscan friar against corrupt clerics. It’s unclear exactly when Maid Marian gets involved in the Robin Hood legend, but Robin and Marian’s romance has roots in a thirteenth-century French play, *Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion*. The “Robin” of the play, however, is not Robin Hood, but a knight, who rescues a fair maid. This story, however, became a popular May festival theme, and eventually the Robin Hood legend adds a side mission, in which Robin Hood competes in a May festival archery tournament and wins the heart of maid Marian.



By the sixteenth century, Robin Hood was cemented firmly into English tradition, but was still set in no particular period in history. It was John Major’s *Historia Majoris Britanniae* in 1521 that located Robin in the midst of the reign of Richard I “the Lionhearted.” It was also Major’s reframing of Robin Hood that converted him and his Merry Men from a morally questionable band of robbers to an altruistic band of outlaw-heroes. In earlier medieval works, a yeoman Robin warns his men not to harm the poor, but he and his men also do nothing in particular to help the poor. In Richard Grafton’s *Chronicle at Large* (1569), Robin leaves his yeoman status behind and becomes the displaced and impoverished Earl of Huntingdon. By the end of the sixteenth century, the newly aristocratic Robin robs from the rich to give to the poor, regularly keeps a Franciscan friar in his band of Merry Men, and maintains his chivalric devotion to good king Richard and to Marian, his lady fair.

Once Robin’s reputation is tamed, the appetite for Robin Hood stories becomes nearly endless. There are 38 distinct extant ballads produced between the 15th and 17th centuries and countless novels, poems, songs, plays, and films after that. Robin, converted from a morally ambiguous brigand to the ultimate example of chaotic good, becomes a folk-hero for the ages.

# Who's Who?

## The Outlaws of Sherwood

### Robin Hood

Displaced son of the Saxon lord Robert, Earl of Huntingdon, Robin is an unlikely hero for the common folk, but his Merry Men consist mostly of Saxon yeomen, even if his love interest is a Norman lady.

### Maid Marian

As a Norman noblewoman, Marian's choices should have been limited, but she sacrifices a life of comfort and duty for a life in the greenwood. In most versions of the story, she is the king's ward, which makes her near-royalty. Her love for a Saxon outlaw would be even more an outrage if he wasn't the son of an earl.

### Friar Tuck

Franciscan friars took an oath of voluntary poverty and dedicated their lives to preaching the gospel. Since they were the opposite of most churchmen, whose wealth and power were conspicuous, friars were often the most well-liked of the church's representatives.

### Little John

Little John is the ultimate Saxon yeoman and is one of the oldest characters in the Robin Hood stories, being present as one of Robin's men from the very beginning. Like any good sidekick, Little John's honest heart and intelligence mark him as a match for Robin. In most versions of the story, Little John is with Robin to the very end.

### Doerwynn

Doerwynn appears to be Ludwig's invention, but she's part of a long line of feisty ladies-in-waiting who help Maid Marian negotiate her difficult position between the Sheriff of Nottingham and Robin Hood.

## The Law

### Prince John

Son of the late King Henry II and younger brother of the current King Richard I (see "Twelfth-Century England" for more). His is the highest-ranking and *almost* the most powerful character. Though if he could get his brother out of the way...

## The Sheriff of Nottingham

The medieval “shire reeve” was responsible for managing an estate on behalf of an aristocratic landholder. As such, he was often the least popular figure in the shire, hated by the lord’s tenants, who paid their rents and taxes directly to the reeve, and distrusted by the lord, since a savvy reeve could easily fleece the peasantry and enrich himself by skimming off the top. It’s worth noting that the Sheriff of Nottingham has become so synonymous with being Robin Hood’s enemy that he rarely gets a proper name in the stories, instead being referred to only by his title.

## Sir Guy of Gisbourne

In his first appearance in the Robin Hood legends, Gisbourne is a mercenary, hired to hunt down and kill Robin. Over time, he has evolved into a low-level knight who serves as a henchman to the Sheriff of Nottingham. In various versions of the story, either the Sheriff or Sir Guy will serve as Marian’s (unwanted) suitor.

## The Setting

The setting for Robin Hood's story, Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire, is as important as any of the characters. There's just no Robin Hood without his home in the greenwood (and the travelers on the king's highway from London to Edinburgh).



Holt, *Robin Hood*, p. 82

# Twelfth-Century England

## Normans and Saxons

In 1066, William “the Conqueror,” Duke of Normandy led a collection of Norman knights to the shores of England, where after a series of battles, they defeated the king of England and claimed the island for themselves. The Normans brought feudalism, knighthood, and French to England and established a new class of Norman overlords. From the eleventh century until the Wars of the Roses in the fifteenth century, the kings of England were more French than English in both descent and culture. The Norman lords established such complete control over the English “Saxon” peasantry that modern English has two different words for an animal and the meat that comes from it. Animals typically have names derived from Old English—cow (*cu*), pig (*picga*), sheep (*scēp*), deer (*dēor*)—but when they’re dinner, they have Norman French names—beef (*boeuf*), pork (*porc*), mutton (*mouton*), and venison (from the Latin *venor*, “to hunt”). The Saxon peasants named the animals they raised on behalf of their lords, but the Norman lords, who got to actually enjoy eating (and occasionally hunting) the things, named the meal. Similarly, Saxons tended to have the names of their yeoman professions (Miller, Cooper, Baker, etc.) or their homes (Goodhill, Rowthorn, Tonbridge, etc.) while Normans carried the names of their fathers and their houses. “Fitz” is Norman for “son of,” and Norman names (Fitzwalter, Fitzgerald, Darcy, Percy, Neville, etc.) still abound in England and Ireland. The rivalry between the new Norman nobility and the displaced English lords became a chief source of political tension and economic inequality from the eleventh century onward. A recent study on economic disparity in 21st-century England found that those families with Norman last names are still among the wealthiest, while the poorest still have traditional Old English names!

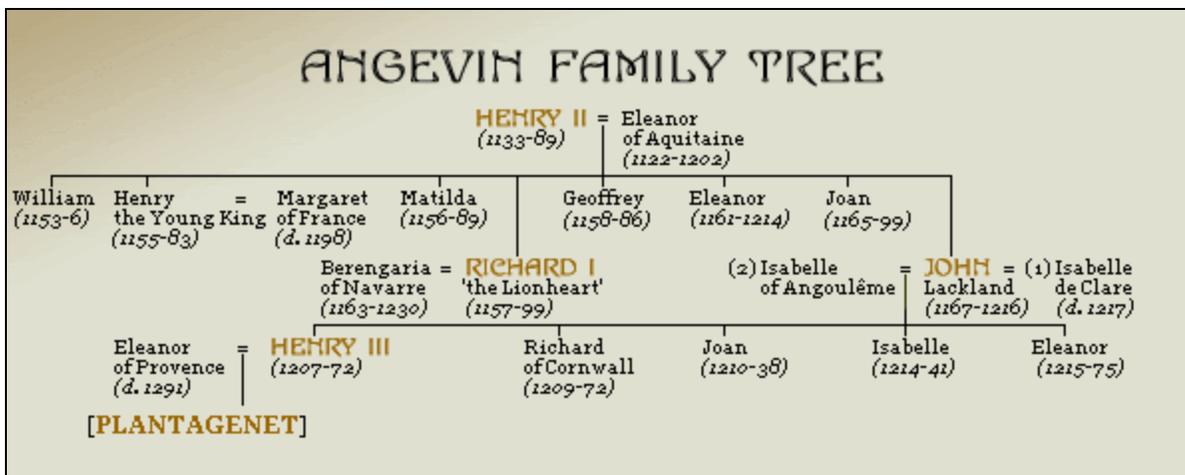
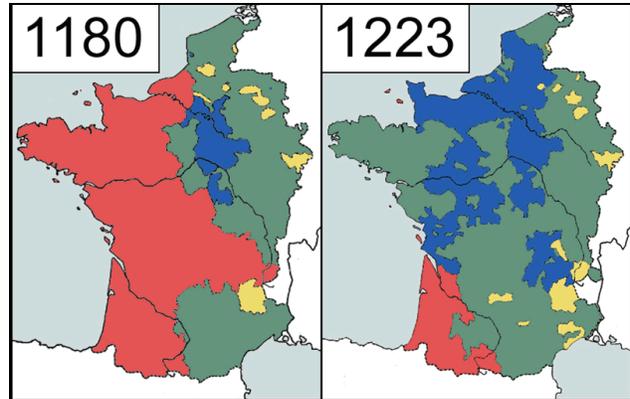
## The Angevin Dynasty

Richard “the Lionhearted” (r. 1189–1199) and his little brother John (r. 1199–1216) had a tough act to follow. Their parents were Henry II (r. 1154–1189) and Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204), two of the wealthiest and most powerful monarchs in medieval Europe. Eleanor was duchess of Aquitaine in her own right, meaning she personally owned and governed nearly a third of modern-day France. As the wife of Louis VII she became queen consort of France in 1137, but having failed to produce a son and heir (though they did have two daughters), the couple had their marriage annulled in 1152. (The annulment may also have had something to do with the scandalous rumors that Eleanor, while on the Second Crusade, had an affair with Raymond, Prince of Antioch and that she and her ladies had ridden bare-breasted like Amazons in front of the troops.) Free to remarry, she chose Henry, and became queen consort of England in 1154, taking her lands from France and making them part of the English crown holdings. She and Henry would go on to have eight children, including five sons. By all rights Richard and John should never have inherited the crown. Richard had two older brothers, William and Henry, and John was the youngest of the five boys. William, however, died in childhood, and Henry died six years before his father, making Richard the sudden and unexpected heir.

Richard was a much better fighter than he was a ruler. His reputation as “the Lionhearted” came almost entirely from his valiant fighting in the Holy Land during the Third Crusade and his many wars in France. On return from the Crusade, Richard was captured by the Holy Roman Emperor (the ruler of Germany) and held for ransom. While John conspired with the Norman nobility to seize power, Eleanor raised the money for Richard’s ransom and oversaw negotiations for his release. He was waylaid in France, however, and ultimately died in the wars there. Having been

shot in the leg with a crossbow, he died of sepsis in 1199. In the ten years of his reign, Richard had spent less than a year total in England. With all of his elder brothers dead, John was poised to become king, but the nobles of England had become accustomed to governing without oversight.

Historians debate whether or not John was really such a terrible king, but it's telling that there has never been a King John II of England. During his reign he suffered a series of losses in the wars with France between 1204 and 1214, losing the majority of the lands his father once ruled. Fed up, his nobles forced him to sign Magna Carta, a legal charter that would forever limit the powers of monarchs in England, making them subject to the will of a council of nobles that would later become Parliament. If John had been a better fighter, maybe he would have had a better reputation. As it is, he is remembered by his nicknames of John "Lackland" and John "Softsword."



## Outlaws, Brigands, and "Wolfsheads"

With high taxes, a newly-formed judicial system, and no real police force to speak of, many peasants (and poor knights) supplemented their income through highway robbery and brigandage. Those unlucky enough to be caught robbing, stealing, evading taxes, or poaching the "king's deer" (literally any deer on lands belonging to the crown) might evade arrest by taking refuge in the woods. With wealthy churchmen and royal officials traveling through the forests on the king's highways (with enough cash on hand to pay the many tolls and fees they'd be charged on the way, it was a lucrative living, provided you could avoid getting caught. Those who were repeat offenders could find themselves condemned as wolfsheads. The label "wolfshead" derived from the legal phrase *Caput lupinum* in medieval English law codes. This referred to a criminal, usually a felon, whose crimes were considered so grave that his rights and protections under the law were waived, meaning he could be killed without legal repercussions. For example, the fourteenth-century *Mirror of Justices*, a textbook on medieval English Common Law states that if someone accused of a felony refuses to answer a court

summons, “‘Wolfshead!’ shall be cried against him, for that a wolf is a beast hated of all folk; and from that time forward it is lawful for anyone to slay him like a wolf.” In many versions of the story, Robin saves Much the Miller’s Son from losing his hand for killing one of the king’s deer by either threatening Guy of Gisbourne or killing one of the Sheriff’s men. That’s all it takes to make Robin—and anyone who gives him aid—a wolfshead.

## A Life of Crime in the Greenwood

There was a real outlaw in Sherwood Forest. In 1265, Roger Godberd, a Saxon yeoman serving under the Norman Earl of Leicester, Simon de Montfort, was outlawed for fighting on his lord’s behalf against King Henry III. He took refuge in Sherwood and lived there for four years, using it as a base of operations for rebellions against the king’s heavy taxation of his subjects. At the height of his power, it was said that he could muster an army of a hundred men.

In 1272 the Sheriff of Nottingham, Reginald de Grey, captured Godberd in Rufford Abbey and held him prisoner in Nottingham Castle. Godberd escaped, and a local knight, Richard Foliot, offered sanctuary to Godberd and his men in Castle Fenwick. Foliot was convicted of aiding outlaws and lost possession of Fenwick Castle. Godberd and his men were captured and tried. At Godberd’s trial, King Edward I, newly returned from the Ninth Crusade, pardoned and freed him.

## Women



Were women oppressed in the Middle Ages? Well, it depends on the woman. More accurately, it depends on her social status. The incredibly wealthy and elite, like Eleanor of Aquitaine, had power enough to secure a degree of independence, but a woman of any status was expected to preserve her reputation for chastity and form a strong marriage alliance with a suitable spouse chosen for her by her family. While we often romanticize the peasantry by saying that poor women could marry for love

while aristocratic women had to marry for politics, poor women still had to take status and (relative) wealth into account when choosing a spouse. There was one option open to women who didn’t want to marry and live to the ripe old age of “died in childbirth”: the convent. Women who became nuns could receive an education, and the heads of convents, called abbesses, could end up as the powerful administrators of vast estates. For women who refused both marriage and the church, there were few options. Some women worked in skilled artisan industries, but older unmarried women, called “singlewomen,” presented a social, legal, and economic problem for everyone. We do know that some women became outlaws (about twelve percent of those prosecuted for membership in a society of outlaws in medieval England were women), though the majority of these women were from the lower classes and often worked alongside their husbands or sons. It would be near impossible for a daughter of an elite family like Marian to run off with a band of outlaws and expect to retain her family and status, but that’s what makes it romantic. It helps that, in many versions of the story, Robin is the Earl of Huntingdon and therefore a suitable match for her (once he receives a pardon, that is).



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