

The 'Marchaunt' of Sherwood:

Mercantile Ideology in A Gest of Robyn Hode

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One of the striking features of A Gest of Robyn Hode is the incongruity between Robin's social class -- yeomanry -- (not an outlaw. GK) and his repeated display of knightly customs and etiquette, such as offering liveries and fees to newly recruited gang members; granting a boon to the wife of the bankrupt knight; not eating until an "unkouth gest" arrives; and hand-washing before meals. Despite this fact, Rodney Hilton and Maurice Keen argued that the yeomen in the early Robin Hood poems represent dissatisfied manorial peasants. And, although J.C. Holt sharply disagreed with Hilton and Keen -- causing Keen to later modify his position -- by identifying the yeomen with "the retainers and dependants of the crown, the aristocracy, and the landed gentry," he persisted in localizing the audience of the poems in the manorial halls of the countryside.

But the argument for a manorial audience remains unconvincing because it does not adequately explain the Gest-poet's transfer of knightly-chivalric virtues to members of a lower social and economic class. More recent criticism has noted, in fact, that landed interests play only a small role in the Gest. While it is true that the abbot of St Mary's attempted to dispossess Sir Richard of his property, the episode is simply the catalyst for the central, key narrative -- Robin's rescue of the distressed knight, Sir Richard at the Lee.

Moreover, Richard Tardif has convincingly argued that the social context for the early Robin Hood poems is urban rather than rural: "the town itself, almost invariably Nottingham, is the sole locus of social imagery--of occupation, trade, and political structures-- for the cycle." Tardif thus extends the meaning of "yeomen" to include journeymen tradesmen and locates the audience of the ballads in the urban lower class. These journeymen -- or covenant servants working for wages -- formed their own fraternities, frequently coming into conflict with not only the civil authorities but also with the master guilds into which they were refused admission. Tardif shows how the two contradictory images of criminal activity and the suppressed yeoman fraternities became fused in the Robin Hood poems (The real Robin Hood is a master tradesman who has issues with the establishment i.e. Gisbourne. GK)

Even though his contribution adds considerably to our understanding of the Gest, it nevertheless fails to explain in a satisfactory way the presence of knightly-chivalric ideology in the early Robin Hood poems. Tardif attributes the latter to "ideology lag": that is, the poems express customs and manners "in the terms of an already-available value-system from the land."

Drawing upon Michael Nerlich's book, *Ideology of Adventure*, I will argue instead that the creators of the early Robin Hood poems deliberately cloaked them in courtly ideology, not because of "ideology lag" but because the poems themselves marked a stage in the dialectical process of transforming the hero from knightly adventurer to merchant adventurer. (Robin appears to have been an outlaw early on, perhaps as a result of killing his stepfather at plow in Loxley. GK)

The poems thus reveal what Nerlich calls a "change of consciousness" from the courtly-knightly ideology of adventure to mercantile self-awareness and self-fashioning. The virtues celebrated in courtly romance--martial prowess, voluntary daring, quest for unpredictable risk, loyalty to a revered lady, solidarity of the group, and largesse--have been conserved, imitated, and appropriated by the urban merchant and artisan classes, who are the producers and consumers of the Robin Hood poems. The outlaw of Sherwood in this sense fulfils the need for a mercantile hero to replace the knightly hero of the aristocratic romances. Robin Hood's imitation of courtly behaviour and forms in the Gest is not simple flattery but part of a complex dialectical process--imitation signifying appropriation, the end of which is domination.

In tracking Nerlich's "change of consciousness" from the knightly-courtly ideology to the mercantile ideology in the Robin Hood ballads, I find it best to describe it as a three-stage process:

1. Presenting the two ideologies as distinct, if not oppositional entities, with courtly ideology dominating.

Most chivalric romances either ignore mercantile matters or treat them in a condescending, if not contemptuous manner. In the tail-rhyme romance *Octavian*, for instance, the Roman Emperor's son Florent is adopted and raised by the merchant Clement. Twice Florent is sent to town to conduct business, and twice he instinctively exchanges his goods and money for a falcon and a war-horse. Thus, Florent's inborn nobility conflicts with the bourgeois ethos of his adoptive father.

2. Yeomanry imitating courtly culture by having the yeoman hero act as if he were knightly.

In *Robin Hood and the Potter*, Robin exchanges identities with a potter in order to court the wife of the sheriff by giving her five pots, a gold ring, and a white palfrey. He also uses the ruse of the incompetent potter, who sells his pots well below their true market value, in order to entice the sheriff into the forest where the latter is captured and robbed. While no doubt there is some comedy directed at unorthodox business practices in the poem, the selling of the pots at ridiculously low prices is the means by which Robin is able to humiliate the sheriff twice over.

3. Mercantile culture appropriating and dominating courtly culture

The knightly adventure is converted to mercantile adventure. This stage is best exemplified in *A Gest of Robyn Hode* when Robin is shown to be superior to the downtrodden and bankrupt knight, Sir Richard at the Lee. The main benefit of such a schema is that it allows us to assess the degree of ideological transformation in each of the early outlaw tales. Given limited space, however, I will focus the remainder of my remarks on *A Gest of Robyn Hode*.

As I have already mentioned, Robin Hood, who is clearly identified as a yeoman, imitates knightly behaviour by giving liveries and fees to his retained men; by acting in a courteous manner (the word "curteyse" is used seventeen times); by refusing to eat until he is visited by an unknown guest (like King Arthur in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*); by showing respect to his social superiors in lowering his hood and kneeling; and by granting a boon to the wife of Sir Richard at the Lee, the impoverished knight. Indeed, Robin exhibits all of the courtly virtues enumerated by Nerlich, but he also personifies the concomitant commercial values of the guildsman or merchant, which reveal that the poem has already undergone significant ideological transformation. (This happened in real life with Robin of Loxley/Robin Hood. GK)

While Tardif makes a compelling case for the presence of commercial elements in the *Gest*, he over restricts the audience to journeymen and apprentices---the "have nots" of the guild system---not fully realizing that the organization, officers, and activities of Robin's "guild" or "fellowship" are derived from the policies and practices of the urban guilds, including the master guilds or Great Livery Companies.

There were some six hundred merchant and craft guilds scattered throughout England at this time, and many records, dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, survive in the form of royal charters, statutes, licenses, by-laws, ordinances, and writs. The parallels between guild policies and practices and specific scenes in the *Gest* are compelling, offering convincing evidence that the poem was composed for an audience who would not only recognize the mercantile allusions but also appreciate the yeoman hero's proving himself superior to a member of the knightly class.

Guild Charters and Royal Favour

Close ties between commercial interests and royal favour are evidenced by the fact that the guilds were chartered by letters patent confirming their privileges. The practice began under Edward III and, as a result, seven of the twelve Great Livery Companies of London were chartered during his long reign -- the Grocers, Drapers, Goldsmiths, Skinners, Merchant Tailors, Salters, and Vintners. Edward III, incidentally, was the first monarch to become an official guild member, having joined the Linen-armourers or Merchant Tailors. (He may have known Robin Hood in real life. GK)

Generally speaking, the guilds were pro-monarch and pro-war, as long as their monopolies were protected. From an economic standpoint the royal charters allowed the guilds to control the import and export of wares, to limit guild membership, and to fix prices. And they paid dearly for these privileges, as the Crown, during the early years of the Hundred Years War, not only borrowed enormous sums but also manipulated the wool market in order to raise even more revenues for the war effort. The guilds were also pro-

war because keeping the shipping lanes open to the continent was vital for the wool and wine trades. Chaucer's Merchant typifies this attitude when he urges that the trade route between Middleburgh and Orwell be protected at any cost.

Who can forget the famous recognition scene in the 1938 film, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, when Errol Flynn recognizes King Richard the Lion Heart. (Hollywood fiction. GK) We have a similar scene at the end of the *Gest* when Robin meets King Edward, disguised as a monk, in the forest. As soon as the monk displays the king's seal, claiming to be his messenger, Robin drops to his knees and exclaims "I love no man in all the worlde/ So well as I do my kynge" And later when Robin recognizes King Edward, he and the outlaws "kneled downe in that place." It is clear then that Robin's outlawry is not directed at the king himself but at corrupt civil and religious officials, such as the sheriff and the abbot of St Mary's. (This is the nub of the matter. In real life Robin was imprisoned and possibly outlawed by Gisbourne in the Peasants Revolt who was the chief magistrate as well Lord Mayor. GK)

Guild Patrons

The guilds also chose patron saints, and the Virgin is the patron of four of the Great Livery Companies: the Drapers, Clothworkers, Mercers, and Skinners. Although the outlaws in the *Gest* swear oaths to God and to other saints, they have chosen the Virgin as their intercessor and protector. As the following lines indicate, Robin hears a Holy Mass before each meal of the day, and he loved

"Oure dere Lady" most of all.
Every day or he wold dyne
Thre messis wolde he here.

The one in the worship of the Fader,
And another of the Holy Gost,
The thirde of Our dere Lady,
That he loved allther moste.

Robyn loved Oure dere Lady.

The Virgin also plays a major role in one of the central episodes in the *Gest*: Robin's loan of £400 to the bankrupt knight, Sir Richard at the Lee, and its miraculous repayment by a monk from the Virgin's abbey in York.

Guild Organization

The chief officer of a guild was called "master" or "warden," and the organization was a brotherhood or fellowship of freemen. (Robin Hood was a freeman in real life. GK) The Drapers' Company was governed by a master, four wardens, and thirty assistants, who supervised the activities of 130 to 180 liveried members as well as those "outside the cloth," that is, journeymen (day labor), servants, and apprentices.

In the *Gest* Robin is addressed as "maister" six times, while his chief associates---Little John, Wil Scarlok, and Much the Miller's Son---are either the "brethern" (two times) or "fellows" (two times), and the entire organization itself is called a "company" or "meyne" (nine times). The fellowship is also composed of "seven score of wyght yemen" who rush to Robin's side when he needs them -- the number 140 corresponding to the number of guild members in livery.

Recruitment of New Members

Guild ordinances also established guidelines for the recruiting and training of new members. Candidates for admission had to have a craft or skill; to pay a fee to join; to go through an apprenticeship, usually lasting seven to ten years, and, once selected, were given distinctive clothing or livery and admitted to the "freedom of the city." When the *Gest*-poet addresses his audience as "gentilmen,/ That be of frebore blode" he is referring to hereditary freedom, and this type of freedom was a prerequisite for the second type -- a guildsman who had passed his apprenticeship and hence qualified for citizenship and freedom of the City. (Robin Hood was both freeman by nature and by trade. He demonstrated his hereditary freedom in no uncertain terms. GK)

The recruitment of a new member occurs in the *Gest* when Little John confronts the Sheriff's cook and fights him to a draw. Having displayed his special skill, the cook is then recruited by Little John who offers him livery and fee.

'I make myn avowe to God,' sayde Litell Johnn,
'And by my true lewté,
Thou art one of the best swordemen
That ever yit sawe I me.

'Cowdest thou shote as well in a bowe,
To grene wode thou shuldest with me,
And two times in the yere thy clothinge
Chauged shulde be,

'And every yere of Robyn Hode
Twenty merke to thy fe.'
'Put up thy swerde,' saide the coke,
'And felowes woll we be.

Another example occurs at the beginning of the third fitt when Little John, disguised as the yeoman archer Reynolde Grenlef, is himself recruited by the sheriff after winning the archery contest. Upon being offered the annual fee of twenty marks, Little John responds that the sheriff must first get "leve" or permission from his master, Sir Richard at the Lee, to whom he is bound. Had he not done so, the sheriff would have violated both civil law governing apprenticeship contracts and guild ordinances that prohibited the enticement of another's apprentice. (The Gest is portraying real life. GK)

Training of Apprentices

After Little John successfully lures the sheriff into the forest, the latter is stripped of his clothing and given a green mantle to wear. Robin then proclaims that the sheriff will live with them for twelve months, during which time he will teach him to be an outlaw.

'Make glade chere,' sayde Robyn Hode,
'Sheref, for charité,
For this is our ordre iwys,
Under the grene wode tree."

'This is harder order,' sayde the sherief,
'Than any ankir or frere;
For all the golde in mery Englonde
I wolde nat longe dwell her.'

'All this twelve monthes,' sayde Robyn,
'Thou shalt dwell with me;
I shall the teche, proude sherif,
An outlawe for to be.' (Outside of the corrupt law. GK)

Robin's references to "our ordre" and to a one-year training period resonate with allusions to guild policies and practices regarding the relations between masters and apprentices -- the occasion is marked by a meal and the presentation of a livery; the master promises to supply him with room, board, and clothing for a specified period of time; the apprentice pays an enrollment fee in the amount of £300 (the amount taken by Little John); and he swears to do his master no injury. (Possibly meaning in business? GK)

Giving of Liveries

The wearing of distinctive clothing or liveries by guild members dates from the second marriage of Edward I to Margaret of France when six hundred guildsmen rode "in one livery of red and white, with the consonances (rhymes) of their mysteries (mystery plays) embroidered on their sleeves."

The common habit consisted either of the "hole clothing" (cloak or gown and hood) or the hood alone (called the "hodyng") which was worn by the lesser members. The liveries were distributed to new members at the annual election dinner. The colours of the liveries changed every two years or so until they became fixed in the early seventeenth century. The Drapers' ordinances state that "in 1483, 'violet in grayne cloth' is mentioned for the gown, and 'cremesin in grayne' for the hood; in 1495 half murrey and half violet for both gowns and hoods; and 1498 murrey for the gown, and blue and crimson for the hood" (Herbert 1:441).

In the Gest the giving and receiving of liveries play a central role, marking the recruitment of a new member into the band of outlaws. After the sheriff's cook fights

Little John to a draw in the third fitt, Little John invites him to return with him to the greenwood, offering him two changes of clothing annually and twenty marks as his fee. In the first fitt, Robin outfits the threadbare knight in a livery of deeply-dyed scarlet, which in essence makes the knight his man. Similarly, when the Sheriff of Nottingham is captured in the forest, he is stripped of his hose, shoes, kirtell, and fur-lined coat and dressed in a "grene mantle." Robin then offers to teach the sheriff how to be an outlaw, effectively recruiting him as an apprentice. Finally, when in the eighth fitt Robin meets King Edward, he sells him thirty-three yards of Lincoln green cloth in which he and his knights dress as they ride towards Nottingham. The fact that the guildsmen and the outlaws both wear distinctively coloured liveries with hoods should not go unnoticed, nor should Robin's surname, Hood, which undoubtedly refers to the cloth head covering. (A headpiece denotes superiority or leadership as with an academic hood or a judges wig. GK)

Right of Search

Among the privileges confirmed by royal charter was the right of the guild to search merchandise offered for sale, to detect dishonest practices, and to punish the offenders (Herbert 1:41). The Drapers shared with the Merchant Taylors the right to search all of the cloth offered for sale and to mark it using the Drapers' ell or the Taylors' "silver yard" (Johnson 1:102). In the Gest, Robin insists upon the "right of search" twice when he orders Little John to search both the knight's and monk's mantles that have been spread on the ground). There may also be an allusion to the Drapers' ell or standard measure when Little John wildly mismeasures the scarlet cloth intended for the knight.

Perjury as the Highest Offence

Perjury, or taking an oath contrary to the truth, was a high crime in the guild and could result in expulsion (Herbert 1:49). This may be related to the game of "truth or consequences" in the Gest. If a guest in the poem lies about the amount of money in his possession, he is robbed, but if he tells the truth he is allowed to keep his money. It will be recalled too that the sheriff swears an oath not to injure Robin or harm any of his men, but after the archery contest he attacks the outlaws and severely wounds Little John. Robin is horrified because the sheriff has broken the oath he made in the forest.

Guild Ceremonials

The guild ordinances also governed the company's ceremonies, such as feasting, pageants and "shews," and "ridings" or processions, all of which have parallels in the Gest. Each guild held an annual feast on its patron's feast day, during which elections were held and officers--the master, wardens, assistants, and clerk--were chosen. The grocer's feast was held on St. Anthony's day in 1345. and the brothers, wearing their liveries, assembled "to commune and dine together."

The surviving bills of fare indicate that the election dinners were lavish affairs with multiple courses of swan, capons, venison, partridges, bread and wine. Each member was assessed a fee that went toward the cost of the meal, and non-attending members were fined. (Herbert 1:75-7).

As we have already seen, in the Gest Robin will not eat until he is accompanied by a "guest" or a newly recruited member. Following the meal, the newcomer is assessed a fee. The guests include Sir Richard, the sheriff, the high cellarer of St. Mary's, and King Edward.

After serving the bankrupt knight an elaborate feast, for instance, Robin exclaims, "But pay or ye wende" (l. 145). In addition, after Little John recruits the sheriff's cook, the two of them sit down to a fine meal (ll. 685-88). Sir Richard's meal is especially grand as his bill of fare includes "brede and wyne," "nombres of the dere," "swannes" and "fessautes," and "foules of the ryvere."

Guild Entertainments

After the feasting and election ceremonies took place, minstrels, often accompanied by musicians, performed dumb shows or mummings, short plays, and "talkyngs," of which the Gest itself must be counted a rare example. Although no manuscript of the poem survives, the printed versions preserve evidence of the original oral delivery to a live audience: the opening formula, "Lythe and listin, gentilmen...I shall you tel of a gode yeman" (Two points, firstly the Gest appears to be the original text and it is about a yeoman and not an outlaw. GK).

The frequent use of speech designations, "bespake Lytell Johnn;" the oral transitions, "Now lete we that monke be stylle / And speke we of that knyght;" and the large amount of dramatic dialogue (the ratio of dialogue to narrative being three to one). We are however lacking the oral and non-verbal cues that signalled the original context of the performance. As Dean Hoffman convincingly demonstrated recently in his masterful recitation of passages from the Gest, the original context was in part comic if not satirical, especially in those passages where Little John rebelled against the authority of "master" Robin (notice Robin is "master," not an outlaw GK).

This tone of carnivalesque irreverence towards authority or rival organizations is strongly reminiscent of the modern-day celebrity "roast," such as man-of-the-year award given by the Hasty Pudding Theatricals at Harvard or similar awards given by innumerable fraternal and charitable organizations.

Guild "Ridings"

Another important function of the guilds was to participate in processions on horseback to welcome and escort dignitaries, including the mayor, sheriff, and monarch, into London. During the coronation procession of Henry IV in 1399, the "new king was escorted by prodigious numbers of gentlemen, with their servants in liveries and hoods and the different companies of London, led by their wardens, were clothed in their proper liveries, and bore banners of their trades" (Herbert 1:90). A similar "riding" or mounted procession occurs at the end of the Gest when Robin and his company, all wearing Lincoln green liveries, accompany King Edward from Sherwood into Nottingham:

All the people of Notyngham
They stode and behelde;
They sawe nothyng but mantels of grene
That covered all the felde.

Guild Money-lending

According to W. M. Ormrod, it was routine for the crown in the first half of the fourteenth century to convene merchant assemblies in order to negotiate wool subsidies and to force loans. It is estimated that between 1337 and 1349 -- the beginning of the Hundred Years War -- the citizens of London, many of whom were wealthy merchants, advanced £120,000 to King Edward III (p. 174). And between 1343 and 1351 three monopoly companies loaned a staggering £369,000 to the crown (p. 184).²⁰ On a much smaller scale it was also common practice, as Sylvia Thrupp observes, for debtors to borrow money from merchant companies, and a charitable loan chest was maintained for that purpose.

Money lending plays a major role in the Gest -- Robin's loan of £400 to the bankrupt knight Sir Richard at the Lee is both the central and key episode. It is important to recall that the aid is in the form of a loan, not an outright gift. This scene contrasts vividly with chivalric practice when knights were praised for "freedom" or generosity of goods and spirit. In Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" Theseus gives Arcite, disguised as Philostrate, "gold to mayntene his degree," with no thought to being repaid. In mercantile ideology, the virtue of generosity has been reconfigured as a loan to be repaid. Robin, furthermore, drives a hard bargain when he rejects Sir Richard's offer of God Himself as his guarantor: "Find me a better borowe," sayde Robyn, / "Or money getest thou none." After Sir Richard offers the Virgin Mary as his guarantor, Robin heartily agrees, as he is devoted to the Virgin, and orders Little John to go to his treasure box and carefully count out the £400. The two then agree that the loan is to be repaid in twelve months. After the year passes, Robin anxiously waits to be repaid his money. When the knight is late on the repayment day, Robin twice confesses, "For I drede Our Lady be wroth with me, / For she sent me nat my pay." While Robin sounds harsh in demanding a guarantor or surety for the loan as well as a definite repayment date, he is following routine guild policies. (Robin is a guildsman at this time. GK)

Mercantile Activities

Robin's aid to the knight continues in the first fitt when Little John suggests that they give him a "lyveray" because his clothing is "full thynne" (ll. 277-80). Little John goes on to say:

'For ye have scarlet and grene, mayster,
And many a riche aray;
Ther is no marchaunt in mery Englonde
So ryche, I dare well say.'

Robin replies by commanding Little John to "Take hym thre yerdes of every colour" and warns him to make sure it is well measured. Little John proceeds to measure out the cloth with the stave of his longbow, adding three additional feet with each handful. Concerned about the display of excess, Much the Miller's Son exclaims: "What devylles drapar...Thynkest thou for to be?" Will Scarlok then laughs, saying that John can afford to give him "gode mesure" because it isn't costing him anything.

There are several key points here. First, by outfitting the knight, Robin is in essence retaining the knight as his servant, and, as we later see, he performs this service at the end of the fifth fitt by offering Robin and his men sanctuary and protection in his castle against the sheriff.

Second, Robin is explicitly identified as a rich cloth merchant (not an outlaw) with "many a riche aray," and he exercises his trade at the beginning of the eighth fitt when he sells thirty-three yards of Lincoln green cloth to King Edward.

Third, when Robin orders Little John to measure the cloth carefully and he responds by wildly miss-measuring it with his bow-stave, they are playing the roles of "master" and serving-man or apprentice. The scene has nothing to do with Robin's "largesse," as Douglas Gray suggests; instead, the scene dramatizes the friction between a master guildsman and his lesser tradesman. (Little John has an 'attitude problem' towards his master as we see in other rhymes. GK)

Fourth, by using the bow-stave to measure the cloth, Little John is resisting the authority of the established cloth guilds--the Draper's Company and the Merchant Tailors--to impose the standard measure or "Silver Yard" on cloth dealers. These guilds, which had absolute jurisdiction over the manufacture and sale of cloth, wielded their royally chartered power by searching shops in order to make sure that the proper yard measure was used. Fraudulent cloth merchants were punished by fines and even imprisonment. (Herbert 1:46.) Thus, when Little John uses the bow-stave as a measure, which is some sixty-seven inches in length instead of thirty-six inches, as a measure, he is challenging the right of the cloth merchants, symbolized by Robin Hood himself, to intimidate either the lesser tradesmen or a rival guild. Furthermore, when Much accuses Little John of acting like the "devylles drapar," he may not only be commenting on his reckless behaviour but identifying the very guild that commissioned the poem to be recited by a minstrel at one of its annual election feasts.

Cloth Selling

The large number of references to cloth and to types of clothing is noteworthy, indicating a special interest in the manufacture and especially the retailing of cloth. Articles of dress range from hode (8 times), mantel (6 times), and kirtell (1 time) to cote of pie (1 time), breche (1 time), schert (1 time), and cole (1 time).

A variety of types of cloth and their distinctive colours are also mentioned: scarlet and grene ("in graine" is a dyeing term), scarlet and of raye ("striped,"), whyte and rede, graye, blacke, grene, and Lyncolne grene (l. 1685). Robin is actually cast in the role of a Draper in the scene at the beginning of the eighth fitt in which King Edward asks Robin if he has any green cloth to sell:

'Haste thou ony grene cloth,' sayd our kyng,
'That thou wylte sell nowe to me?'

Robin replies:

'Ye, for God,' sayd Robyn,
'Thyrty yerdes and thre.'

Although the Middle English verb *sellen* can mean "to give" as well as "to sell for money," the latter meaning is clearly intended here because it would be out of character for Robin to give the cloth away. The king then casts off his monk's garb and dons the "grene garment," and together with Robin and his men he rides off to Nottingham as their "mantels of grene" cover the field. The royal transaction is not mere fantasy -- surviving records indicate that the Drapers manufactured and sold liveries "for great lords and others of the Commons." An entry in the Calendar of Close Rolls for 1313-18 notes that Richard de Welleford sold material to another Draper "for the King's use" (Johnson 1:85).

Urban Crime and Public Disorder

Links between urban crime and the lesser yeoman fraternities have been convincingly catalogued by Tardif, who argues that, following the plague of 1348, large numbers of the rural lower class moved from the farms to the towns and, in doing so "this newly-created class of under-privileged urban workers formed the basis for the emergence of a criminal society."

Tardif offers dozens of examples of criminal behaviour, ranging from violations of the new economic regulations in the Statute of Labourers, political protest (rioting at mayoral elections), to actual capital crimes (robbery, murder, and abuses of the forest). Interestingly, three of the criminal gangs actually were identified (or identified themselves) as Robin Hood or one of his men. A petition to Parliament in 1439 complains about the fugitive Piers Venables of Derbyshire and his thugs who "beyng of his clothinge (i.e. livery), and in manere of insurrection went into the wodes in that county like it hadde be Robyn Hode and his meynee" (Rotuli Parliamentorum, 1767-77, v, 16).

As Tardif notes, while Piers is called a "Gentilman," his followers are identified as "towne yeomen." Another lawbreaker, Robert Marchall, led a riot at the Trinity Sunday fair in Walsall, and called himself "Robyn Hood." And in 1416/17 Robert Stafford, a chaplain in the town of Lyndefeld, assumed the name "Frere Tuk." (Nicknames like the earlier robinhoods. GK) Although Tardif goes a long way towards explaining the links between urban crime, yeoman fraternities, and the popularity of the Robin Hood legend, he doesn't address the more patrician guilds' interest in the outlaw hero. The answer, I think, lies in the very nature of dramatic social change -- as the Great Livery Companies gained increasing wealth, power, and prestige they inevitably came into conflict with any institution -- crown, court, city, and church -- that stood in their way. There were tensions too among the competing guilds, such as the Drapers, Merchant Tailors, and Mercers, and even within each guild as the underprivileged members (the journeymen and the apprentices) vied for equity.

Conclusion:

Previous commentary on the early outlaw tales has reified the oppositions as the forest versus the town, church, and court. The forest has been enshrined as the imagined refuge, the securely collective world, and the fully natural state in which the oppressed underclass has escaped in order to reconstitute the "liberties of the greenwood." Opposed to the forest are the engrossing negative values of the dominant social, political, and economic powers -- the court, church, and town, so marked by statutory law, cash nexus, oppression, and corruption. (Life is more competitive in the towns. GK)

While these oppositions are certainly present in many of the poems, there is another ideological subtext at work -- the opposition between the petty nobility, personified by the bankrupt knight, Sir Richard at the Lee, and the newly emerging merchant adventurer, represented by Hood and Company. The Gest of Robyn Hode then registers a crucial moment in the social and economic transformation of late medieval England, when the merchant adventurer, in assimilating the courtly ideology, changed it, as Nerlich observed, "in the direction of bourgeois interest and the expression of this interest."

See the source for notes:

<http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~ohlgren/RobinHood/MerchantofSherwood.htm>