

Editor: KARL FUGELSO



Studies in Medievalism XXX

Politics and Medievalism (Studies) II

Robin Hood Political Memes: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama, and the Far Right's Appropriation of the English Outlaw¹

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In her book *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman argues that while “memes are seemingly trivial and mundane artifacts, they actually reflect deep social and cultural structures.”² The participatory culture ingrained within internet communities and the creation and dissemination of memes allows for an individual to seamlessly enter into the online political discourse, ingest the message and meaning within the meme, and then transform that signifying matrix into political action. Audiences can transfer that meme to another person, comment on one in a Twitter feed or online forum, replicate it or its message at a political rally, or embrace the ideology of the meme and put it into action at the voting booth. In the present world of new media, Shifman sees memes working in three interconnected ways: they can function as forms of persuasion or political advocacy; as grassroots action, where participants are empowered through the message of the meme to coordinate and organize online and also on the ground; and as modes of expression and public discussion.³ This essay is a focused venture into the intersected world of medievalismist Robin Hood and political meme culture of the

¹ An early version of this essay was presented at the Twelfth Biennial Conference of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies, University of Montevallo, May 14–15, 2019. I would especially like to thank Leah Haight, Jason Hogue, Valerie B. Johnson, Bethany Jones, and Sabina Rahman for their comments on my paper during the conference. I would also like to thank *Studies in Medievalism*'s two anonymous readers and Karl Fugelso for their thoughtful suggestions.

² Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 15.

³ Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 122–23.

nasty, malevolent, lulz variety from the 2000s and 2010s.⁴ I am especially interested with the ways in which authors and artists have corrupted the good outlaw Robin Hood and his ideology into something nefarious and degenerate. The Robin Hood memes that form the basis of this essay are those that reimagine Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama as versions of the outlaw, and these memes share several characteristics.⁵ Both Clinton and Obama are linked with communist iconography, and the two are portrayed as questionable capitalists. The adage "It's the economy, stupid" is not lost on these memeists, for they stoke the fear of an economy going under at the hands of Clinton and Obama, the former rendered as one whose corrupt family and foundation will use their political connections to bankroll their own interests, and the latter as a socialist in disguise who will expand the welfare state to the detriment of the free market and the benefit of "urban" (black, multicultural, multiethnic) communities. The images of both politicians are often manipulated to highlight some of their noted labels, for example, that Clinton is not mentally sound and that Obama is not "one of us." By embracing the familiar, the trustworthy, and the likeable nature of Robin Hood, the racist and misogynist messages of these political memes become more palatable, more easily ingested, and more likely to be redistributed through social media. If Robin Hood stands for every man and woman, then it is only fitting and expected that his image can be manipulated to adhere to any socio-political belief, even one that Robin Hood would not endorse.

Memes are mobile. They can be uploaded and shared instantaneously; they can be tweeted and retweeted; they can be reused and repurposed so many times and in so many methods and formats that the true origin of a meme can be difficult to determine. In this way, memes resemble Robin Hood, for his true origins are difficult to pin down, and he appears in and morphs into different forms and various texts across the centuries. If we are to consider a precursor to the present-day meme, especially memes connected to Robin Hood, perhaps we should look to the broadside tradition of the seventeenth century.⁶ As with memes, the broadsides are often anonymous works and are inherently stand-alone entries: while they exist within the

⁴ I use the term "lulz" here in accord with its frequent online use as an adaptation of the common acronym "LOL" (Laugh Out Loud) applied to amusement at the misfortune of others, with particular delight in violent, racist, or misogynistic content that contains an element of parody, satire, or physical humor.

⁵ There are of course others politicians who are invoked in Robin Hood memes, such as Bernie Sanders; however, to discuss Sanders would lead us into a different (though interesting) discussion regarding the Robin Hood Tax, and that is best left for another essay.

⁶ For a focused discussion of the Robin Hood broadside ballads, see Stephen Knight, *Reading Robin Hood: Content, Form and Reception in the Outlaw Myth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 83–102.

Robin Hood tradition, very rarely are broadsides connected to any existing Robin Hood story, and never do they link directly to a narrative as a prequel or a sequel. The broadsides are, like memes, mobile and inexpensive to create and consume. Indeed, broadsides, too, are slightly rough around the edges, with blurry images that can be rudimentary and unsophisticated. The images in both genres are often reused and duplicated, and this recycling of art and content in both mediums allows for authors to more easily and quickly assemble and (re)generate their works. Both stationers and memeists, thus, had and have at their disposal a functioning archive of material. With Photoshop and online sites such as Imgflip's Meme Generator, memeists have a limitless supply of images of Robin Hood (especially from the outlaw's film corpus) to manipulate and combine with text and images of politicians to spread political ideologies that are equal parts parody, pastiche, and agonistic rhetoric.

The Robin Hood tradition's proclivity toward change is often a result of historical, political, cultural, literary, or technological variation. An outlaw needs to be able to adjust and adapt to new surroundings in order to survive, and Robin Hood and his physical and textual corpus allow for and encourage this. He is malleable, and the authors exploit this characteristic, both with good and also unfortunate results. The Robin Hood political memes of the 2000s and 2010s reimagine American politicians as Robin Hood. Almost all of them view the outlaw – and thus the political figure – in negative terms. The power of these memes, of course, is the potential for them to enact real political change: Someone may view one of these memes, save it, retweet it, message it, and it could be viewed hundreds if not thousands of times over. Richard Dawkins in his book *The Extended Phenotype* describes how memes behave similarly to a contagious virus, where they propagate indiscriminately and spread discrete pieces of information that are transmitted from one individual to another to "inhabit the brain."⁷

The viral dissemination of agonistic texts and images is glaringly apparent in the Robin Hood–Hillary Rodham Clinton memes. Clinton was and remains a favorite target of right-wing media outlets, many of whom see her as a corrupt politician, one whose "Deep State" connections date back to her time as First Lady of Arkansas and the Whitewater controversy. This duplicitous, underhanded characterization of Clinton works exceedingly well within the loose concept of modern-day Robin Hood tricksterism. On June 14, 2015,

⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype: The Gene as the Unit of Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Medievalist Tom Tyler argues that memes actively affect our actions and behaviors: "Rather than considering the cultural trait or artifact in its own right, we must now suppose that an individual has been infected by a meme, which then manifests in a mode of behavior or the production of a concrete object." See Tom Tyler, *Cifrae: A Bestiary in Five Fingers*, *Posthumanities* 19 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 189.

the front-page image and lead story of Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* were titled "Hillary Clinton wants to take from the rich and give to the poor."⁸ The opening sentences of the article are a direct link to Robin Hood: "Robin Hood has traded tights for a royal-blue pantsuit. Hillary Rodham Clinton rebranded herself as an anti-Wall Street warrior who would take from the rich to give to the poor in an official presidential campaign launch Saturday on Roosevelt Island." The article made an effort to highlight supposed illegal activities by the Clinton Foundation, which remained "vague on details," and took a not-too-subtle ageist and sexist swipe by pointedly noting the candidate was a 67-year-old grandmother. The front-page cover image of the *Post* article is unkind: Robin Hood's green archer attire has been crudely Photoshopped onto her body; she is pulling back on the bow string with an arrow ready to shoot; her mouth is wide open in the midst of an uproarious laugh; and her eyes are squinting. She is a caricature, come to digital life. If she resembles any Robin Hood from the literary tradition, it may be the maniacal killer of foresters in the seventeenth-century broadside and garland poem *Robin Hood's Progress to Nottingham*. The headline of the article makes it clear: if you are rich, or if you are not but are fully supportive of capitalism, look out, she is aiming for you. The image is one that makes Clinton look insane.⁹ This story and its accompanying photo had a life after newspaper print on its way to becoming a meme: the image was first tweeted on the newspaper's Twitter account.¹⁰ As of the writing of this essay, it was retweeted 102 times and liked 46 times. The Twitter comments are all negative: "TMS" writes "Unfortunately she isn't real 'Robin Hood' style. She takes from the rich & puts money in own pocket!"; and "A" comments that "I can see the women lining up to vote for being not only broke, but morally bankrupt too!"¹¹ This *New York Post* cover image that was printed and delivered to homes and uploaded online to the *Post*'s website and its Twitter account is not a meme, but from it memes were created, the first of which was generated on August

⁸ Aaron Short, Amber Jamieson, and Mary Kay Linge, "Hillary Clinton Wants to Take from the Rich and Give to the Poor," *New York Post*, June 14, 2015, <<https://nypost.com/2015/06/14/hillary-touts-girl-power-fair-paychecks-at-campaign-rally/>>, last accessed July 9, 2019.

⁹ The front-page cover image also features President Bill Clinton as Friar Tuck, hiding or lurking in the bottom right corner. The tonsured friar is, of course, meant to connect the lascivious nature of the former president with the stereotype of the wanton Friar. The authors and editors of this *New York Post* piece do know their Robin Hood – and perhaps may have read the dramatic play *Robin Hood and the Friar* or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

¹⁰ *New York Post*, Twitter, June 14, 2015, <<https://twitter.com/nypost/status/610044910356549632>>, last accessed July 9, 2019.

¹¹ Comments on *New York Post*, Twitter, June 14, 2015, <<https://twitter.com/nypost/status/610044910356549632>>, last accessed July 9, 2019. For privacy purposes, I have provided initials of online users.

14, 2015, and liked over 2,122 times as of the writing of this essay.¹² The meme, here as with most memes, is reductionist in its method, content, and delivery, as the image focuses solely on Hillary Clinton's face, with some of the bow and arrow present on the left side of the picture and a portion of her quiver of arrows on the right side. Its message is thus straightforward: "Rodham Hood: Steals from everybody and keeps for herself." It was, in 2017, added to the Reddit subgroup of "Conspiracy Memes."¹³

The conspiratorial nature of anti-Hillary Clinton memes continued throughout the summer of 2016. The meme "Adventures of Rodham Hood" was created and last modified on July 22, 2016, and is found on the website DoubleTake Media, which features memes that skewer and satirize global politicians from all affiliations.¹⁴ This meme shifts the message of the medium away from Clinton's tax policies and history and moves it instead toward the upcoming 2016 election: "Taking a step back into time (*The Adventures of Robin Hood*), Hillary Clinton is stealing the election and possibly your vote in DoubleTake's Parody" Parody, *The Adventures of Rodham Hood*. As with the meme created from the *New York Post* story, DoubleTake Media's meme has Hillary in a stock photo of Errol Flynn from *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938). Significantly, Hillary's/Robin Hood's cap, shirt collar, lower shirt sleeves, and tights are all red, as is the background of the Photoshopped shield that provides the title of this meme, "The Adventures of Rodham Hood." DoubleTake chose a more relaxed, smiling face of Clinton to graft into the head; however, both the caption of the meme and also the striking red color of Clinton's attire are obvious communist dog whistles.

One feature that is shared by a number of Robin Hood political memes is the connection that authors and artists desire to make between Robin Hood, communism or socialism, and race. While still Secretary of State, the meme "Hillary Clinton, ROBIN from the Hood for Climate Change" was produced in December 2009.¹⁵ As with the previous entries, this one emphasizes the theme of stealing from the rich to give to the poor but twists it so as to conform to the ideology of the author. The very brief news story that accompanies this meme is as follows:

¹² "Rodham Hood Steals from Everybody and Keeps for Herself," Smh, Meme on ME.ME, <<https://me.me/i/rodham-hood-steals-from-everybody-and-keeps-for-herself-smh-2821182>>, last accessed July 9, 2019.

¹³ "Rodham Hood!" Conspiracy Memes, Reddit, October 12, 2017, <https://www.reddit.com/r/ConspiracyMemes/comments/7603zg/rodham_hood/?st=jvdw3n-n6&sh=3f97fcd2>, last accessed July 9, 2019.

¹⁴ "Adventures of Rodham Hood," DoubleTake Media, last modified July 22, 2016, <http://www.doubletake-media.com/06_55_01_movie_of_the_weak_rodham_hood.html>, last accessed July 9, 2019.

¹⁵ "Hillary Clinton, ROBIN from the Hood for Climate Change," Miss Moneypenny CPU, December 17, 2009, <<https://moneypennydd.wordpress.com/tag/robin-from-the-hood-for-climate-change/>>, last accessed July 9, 2019.

Lady CaCa of Climate Change. When will politicians stop using natural climate change for their political and financial gain? To restart the U.N.-led Copenhagen CO2 Climate Change talks, Secretary of State Hillary "ROB-inham" Clinton promised the United States will provide \$100 billion annually to assist developing countries with climate change as long as they accept binding commitments that are open to international inspection and verification.¹⁶

The discoloration of Hillary Clinton's skin to a blue-gray color and the manipulation of her facial expression in this meme is unsettling; she appears to be a monstrous Other. On the one hand, she resembles the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*, but on the other, and more sinister, is the connection between Clinton, her then-president, Barack Obama, and "the hood" to which the meme refers. To this end, it can be read as a racist image, with Clinton in an apparent blackface, working in cahoots with African Americans to steal from whites and to funnel that money to developing nations, what Donald Trump later referred to as "shithole countries."¹⁷

The outlaw ideology of Robin Hood and the uncircumscribed, creative autonomy that memeists possess often results in extreme content. Helen Young has observed how the freedom from discrimination is, unfortunately, in our global political environment of racism and white nationalism, "often trumped by the freedom to discriminate."¹⁸ Barack Obama's presence in Robin Hood memes has been associated with the negative elements of the outlaw and is racist in its messages. The meme "Obama's 'Robin Hood Theory' Simplified" was first published on the website The Republican Temple: "The Right Place to Worship."¹⁹ The author of the meme and the brief article that accompanies it is clearly talking to a specific audience, one who is highly suspect of Obama's tax policies and even more suspicious of the president's origins. The news feature notes how "Obama wants to provide 'tax relief' for 95% of working Americans; sounds great in theory, doesn't it? But there is a problem in that 95% of these working Americans don't pay income taxes. It is a lot closer to 40%."²⁰ Like Hillary Clinton, Obama is notably wearing a red cap and scarf, and he is also laughing. On his hat are three capital letters,

¹⁶ "Hillary Clinton, ROBIN from the Hood for Climate Change."

¹⁷ Eli Watkins and Abby Phillip, "Trump Decries Immigrants from 'Shithole Countries' Coming to the US," CNN, January 12, 2019, <<https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/11/politics/immigrants-shithole-countries-trump/index.html>>, last accessed July 9, 2019.

¹⁸ Helen Young, "Freedom to Discriminate," in *Studies in Medievalism XXVIII: Medievalism and Discrimination*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer 2019), 3–12 (4).

¹⁹ "Obama's 'Robin Hood Theory' Simplified," The Republican Temple: "The Right Place to Worship," November 1, 2008, <<https://therpublicantemple.wordpress.com/2008/11/01/obamas-robin-hood-theory-simplified/>>, last accessed July 9, 2019.

²⁰ "Obama's 'Robin Hood Theory' Simplified."

"NFH." The URL at the bottom of the meme notes how this acronym refers to "No Fake Harleys," meaning the motorcycle. Obama, therefore, is not viewed as real and authentic, which in this meme is here clearly code for him being an illegal alien and an illegitimate president. The acronym NFH has a few other disparaging meanings. It is a racist dog whistle for "Not From Here" as well as a homophobic one for "No Fucking Homo." Just as Robin Hood is an outlaw and an outsider, so is Barack Obama, according to the racists from, among other sectors, the Birther, Alternative Right, Neo-Nazi, and White Nationalist movements and organizations. This meme takes up a number of far-right populist talking points, as the caption, pretending to be from Obama himself, says that if he is elected, "I'll steal tax \$\$\$ from workers & redistribute it to the lazy, the poor & illegals!"²¹

A search on the internet uncovers memes that survive from now-defunct websites, where the ghost of Obama/Robin Hood can still haunt certain portions of the electorate. Both United Liberty²² and The Tea Party Tribune²³ created similar memes of Barack Obama in 2009 and 2011, respectively. United Liberty's three platforms are "Free Market," "Individual Liberty," and "Limited Government," and it skews more libertarian, while the Tea Party Tribune is more right wing in its content and opinions. Much like the Republican Temple's Obama meme, these two play into and prey upon the fear of the Other, the suspicion that Obama is not one of "us" and therefore an illegitimate and illegal president, and that there is a communist/socialist conspiracy at work, deep within the US government. The United Liberty meme of an illustrated Obama greatly alters his face, making him appear to be not just an outlaw, but also, with the addition of a beard, a communist revolutionary in the guise of Che Guevara or perhaps Fidel Castro. His facial expression is pensive and serious, which suggests that the author of this meme considers Obama is not playing the part of the fool. The grim expression on Obama's face matches the main text of the meme: "Tax the 'Rich' – Screw the Poor" is written at the top of the meme, while to the right of the image of Obama/Robin Hood "Obama Hood" is written in large capital letters, and

²¹ "Obama's 'Robin Hood Theory' Simplified."

²² On April 15, 2019, the website <www.unitedliberty.org> was still active; however, as of July 9, 2019, the website is down. Since United Liberty's website is down, perhaps indefinitely, this meme can be found here: "Obama Ain't No Robin Hood." Welcome Back to Gotham City, February 28, 2009, <<http://welcomebacktopottersville.blogspot.com/2009/02/obama-aint-no-robin-hood.html>>, last accessed July 9, 2019. The image can also be found by searching Google Images using the search phrase "united liberty barack obama robin hood."

²³ "Who Needs Robin Hood?" The Tea Party Tribune, August 2011, <www.teapartytribune.com/%2F2011%2F08%2Fpage%2F12%2F&psig=AOvVaw1qMtMxAEmb7e4r5rvqG-ma&cust=1563476871166038>. Since Tea Party Tribune's website is down, perhaps indefinitely, this meme can be found by searching Google Images using the search phrase "Tea Party Tribune Who Needs Robin Hood?"

beneath his name is an arrow just above the words "Government: This Time, Trust Us." The Tea Party Tribune's illustrated meme is more similar to the Republican Temple's: Obama is smiling, wearing a dark-green suit with a tie, a green cap with a red hammer and sickle, and a quiver of arrows is on his back. The meme has two pieces of text: on the top left are the words "Spread the Wealth Around," while below Obama/Robin Hood, in a faux-medieval font, are two lines, "Obamahood" and "Surewould Forest." Unsurprisingly, and unabashedly, two of these memes of Obama reach back into the past history of African American stereotypes and bring them into the present, with the help of the medieval Robin Hood. The Republican Temple's and Tea Party Tribune's memes revisit tropes of the stereotype of the zip coon, sometimes called the urban coon, an arrogant figure who dresses in flamboyant and ostentatious clothes and speaks in bastardized, and for some "humorous," English. Humor remains an essential element in these memes of Obama and Clinton. Memeists and audiences are cognizant of the humorous nature of Robin Hood texts, especially the film tradition and the good-natured, playful role that Errol Flynn embraced. The lulz, thus, connects audiences with a dominant trope of the Robin Hood tradition – humor. Should they not find the meme offensive, the lulz allows them an entry point into the participatory racist and sexist political discourse. The laughter that audiences direct at these memes, and the humorous comments that online users make when sharing them, is essential to the sustainability of an environment where memeists and audiences are equally complicit in the propagation of offensive content and in the distortion of Robin Hood.

This essay has been a brief foray into the digital world of Robin Hood political memes that focus on Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama. These two individuals remain ever present in the memesphere but also as constant targets of the Alternative Right, White Nationalists, Neo-Nazis, and Donald Trump. For the far-right, Clinton and Obama, much like Robin Hood, are outsiders who exist outside of the law and can be hunted – attacked in memes – with impunity. Strategically, as Ryan Milner argues, the memeists use antagonistic rhetoric to "cast outsider identities as enemies, working to push those identities out of public conversations."²⁴ The dynamic nature of meme culture allows for ludic overload, where creative play and the potential to offend and injure is limitless. On the one hand, as Maggie M. Williams and Lauren C. Razzore attest regarding the construction of medieval memes, "No one can recreate those historical moments without error, omissions, or embellishment; medieval memes allow us a venue for imagining the past in creative and humorous ways."²⁵ However, not all is

²⁴ Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, The Information Society Series (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 123.

²⁵ Maggie M. Williams and Lauren C. Razzore, "Medieval Memes," in *Medieval Afterlives in*

benign regarding political medievalisms in the current global political state. Andrew B. R. Elliot expertly comments how the:

present power of the appropriation of the Middle Ages by the far right can be seen not to lie in any real kind of relationship with history, but rather with a banal medieval past which lies alongside the present, and which can be summoned at will in the service of present concerns.²⁶

Robin Hood always exists in the present political moment. His malleable outlaw and trickster physiognomies have allowed for a gateway to open in the 2000s, wherein racist, classist, and misogynist attitudes and beliefs have seized upon the mutable nature of his character and ideology, and far-right authors and illustrators have seized upon the opportunity to generate baleful political memes. For the far-right, these political memes represent a shift within the Robin Hood tradition, where the outlaw is no longer the voice of the commons but instead represents the reactionary, racist, and misogynist wing of populist politics.

Contemporary Culture, ed. Gail Ashton (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 322–31 (330–31).

²⁶ Andrew B. R. Elliot, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 170.