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# ASPECTS OF CULTURAL DIFFUSION IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND: THE EARLY ROMANCES, LOCAL SOCIETY AND ROBIN HOOD

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## ASPECTS OF CULTURAL DIFFUSION IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND: THE EARLY ROMANCES, LOCAL SOCIETY AND ROBIN HOOD\*

In his classic statement on the diffusion of cultural patterns in feudal society, Georges Duby envisages a "two-way communication between the cultures of different social levels". Nevertheless, "the popularization of aristocratic models" constituted "the essential, determining motive force in cultural history".<sup>1</sup> The validity and the general utility of this are not to be denied. When brought to the understanding of a specific historical situation, however, such models are apt to give rise to subsidiary questions, rather than provide an immediate explanation of the cultural scene. Can one, for example, isolate factors which will generally encourage or inhibit a two-way communication? Does downward diffusion take different forms? And if so, do they vary in their social and cultural consequences? As far as England of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is concerned both the cultural distance between social classes and the channels of cultural communication (dissemination and interpenetration) remain intensely problematical. One need hardly look further than the debate over the origins, transmission and social meaning of the ballads of Robin Hood inaugurated by R. H. Hilton and J. C. Holt some twenty or

\* This essay is based on a paper delivered to the University of Birmingham research seminar in medieval history in the spring of 1982. I am grateful for the comments that were made on that occasion. I would also like to thank Professors Barrie Dobson, Rodney Hilton and Derek Pearsall for their valuable comments on the subsequent draft of the essay in 1983. Since then evidence has come to light indicating the existence of the Robin Hood legend, in some form, by the middle of the thirteenth century: D. Crook, "Some Further Evidence Concerning the Dating of the Origins of the Legend of Robin Hood", *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xcix (1984), pp. 530-4. As far as I can see, this does not materially affect the interpretation offered here. It should also be noted that the re-examination of the production of the Auchinleck manuscript in the light of the work of A. I. Doyle and M. B. Parkes (see n. 112 below) has now begun: T. A. Shonk, "A Study of the Auchinleck Manuscript: Bookmen and Bookmaking in the Early Fourteenth Century", *Speculum*, lx (1985), pp. 71-91.

<sup>1</sup> Georges Duby, "The Diffusion of Cultural Patterns in Feudal Society", *Past and Present*, no. 39 (Apr. 1968), pp. 3-10 at p. 5, repr. in his *The Chivalrous Society*, trans. Cynthia Postan (London, 1977).

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