

The “heavie writ of outlawry”: Community and the Transformation of Popular Culture from Early Modern Customary Drama to Anthony Munday’s Robin Hood Plays

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ABSTRACT

The medieval Robin Hood ballads and the Robin Hood games of early modern festal customs are both inextricably bound up with ideas of community and companionship. The “performative turn” in recent scholarship reminds us that the combats and contests of both the ballads and the folk games are a central part of early modern customary drama, and such amicable feats of strength and competition add to both the community spirit and the improvisational nature of such calendar customs. Although Anthony Munday’s adaptation of the Robin Hood legend for the Elizabethan stage necessarily recasts this material significantly, Munday at the same time experiments with the thematic and dramatic forms of the earlier tradition. I argue that like other playwrights at the Rose engaged in experiments in popular theatre, Munday attempted an innovative reworking of popular material which engaged with his audience’s expectations, not to appropriate Robin Hood, but to recreate his legend afresh.

KEYWORDS: Robin Hood, Anthony Munday, popular culture, calendar customs, performance theory

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The Robin Hood legend has always had a contradictory relationship with ideas of community. On the one hand, the outlaw himself of course represents the antithesis of communality, as implied by the dual suggestions of the word “outlaw”: punished *for* committing actions outside of the law’s decrees, but also punished *by* being ejected from the law’s protection. On the other hand, it is impossible to think of Robin Hood without also mentioning his merry men: his legend is inextricably bound up with ideas of community and companionship. This is even more significant when one considers the presence of Robin Hood in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century May Games: the legend not only *depicts* male camaraderie, it also allows the opportunity to *enact* it.

The medieval and early modern Robin Hood tradition is implicitly characterised by concern over the outlaw’s background and allegiance. He is a contested figure, a shifting signifier who, as Stephen Knight has commented, reflects “a varied set of forces and influences” which “respond to varying periods and contexts” (“Alterity, Parody, Habitus” 3). This has been particularly evident in scholarship on the outlaw, which has contributed to the increased interest of the last few decades in the overlapping fields of folklore and popular culture studies, often interpreted in relation to questions of class, folk practice, religious change, or social protest. Much work on popular culture has tended to rest upon the assumption of a dichotomous and oppositional relationship between oral “popular” culture and literary “elite” culture, a view which casts the literate and the literary as essentially rapacious and imperialistic.¹ Scholarly debate regarding the nature of festive customs exhibits a preoccupation with the structuring and enactment of authority, being more or less divided between those who see festival as an instrument of social change, and those who view it as a form of containment which is inherently oppressive. This critical discourse has been particularly central to discussions of the medieval and early modern Robin Hood: studies which privilege the folk tradition on the one hand, and those which chart the literary evolution of the legend on the other, share a tendency to subscribe to a narrative of decline, lamenting the disappearance of festive customs and

¹ Cf. e.g. Bristol; Stallybrass and White. Such an approach was particularly influenced by Marxist theorists, and in particular by Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal work on carnival in his doctoral thesis *Rabelais and His World*, first published in English in 1968, and was arguably only reinforced by the new historicist emphasis on the processes and manifestations of power through literary texts and material culture.

viewing the literary innovations within the theatrical tradition in particular as “regrettable,” a “displacement” of popular tastes through which Robin has lost his “social bite” (Davenport 60; Skura 178). This tendency is nowhere more charged than in discussions of perhaps the most controversial Robin Hood texts: the two-part adaptation of the legend by Elizabethan playwright Anthony Munday: *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntington*, written between 1598 and 1599. Partly because they are among the first literary texts to refer to Robin Hood, not as a yeoman, but as an earl, modern commentators have tended to view the plays as exploitative, a poor attempt to appropriate popular culture for an elite audience and for commercial gain. In this article, I wish to suggest that this highly evaluative perspective on the relationship between early modern folk culture and the theatre is not particularly helpful, whereas an approach which uses the idea of performance to examine how the London theatres drew upon and recast popular culture can both tell us a lot more about the relationship between commercial and folk drama, and can also empower a reading of the former which need not be tied up in ideas of decline or appropriation.

Such critical distinctions between popular/elite, powerless/powerful, and oral/literate, have been increasingly challenged in recent years by scholars such as Adam Fox in his study of *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700*. Rather than adopting this adversarial approach, with its emphasis on oppressive power structures at the expense of non-elite experience, we can turn to the so-called “performative turn” which has taken place in the last decades in the humanities, for an alternative model for inquiry which puts more stress both on the circumstances, meanings, and variations across discrete events, and also on the importance of ritual and performance for the construction of individual and societal identities. The performative turn has had, in effect, a dual function: both facilitating a view of everyday functions and behaviours as forms of performance, and also encouraging more scholarly attention to rituals and performances as events, and to the role of individual participants within them. Describing this trend, Peter Burke notes that:

Rituals and festivals are now being approached in a more open way. Older studies of rituals and festival often assumed that they followed scripts, literally as well as metaphorically By contrast, recent anthropological studies of ritual emphasize . . . the multiplicity and even the conflict of meanings of a given

festival What used to be treated as the “same” ritual is now regarded as varying significantly on each new occasion of performance. (“Performing History” 41)

The more nuanced and multivalent perspective allowed by what Burke calls “occasionalism” provides a way of thinking about popular culture(s) which need not rest on binary distinctions, but which can instead take into account the ways in which popular rituals enact communal self-definition at the same time as being a means for culture to be imposed on a community, or while also offering opportunities for individuals to resist, reframe, or re-evaluate the cultural discourses in which they are participating. This can therefore be particularly useful when considering the complex intersections and interactions between official and non-official culture(s) offered by Robin Hood, whose legend permeated late medieval and early modern Mayday practices, and whose status as perennially successful poacher of the king’s deer ensured an implicit symbolic association between the folk traditions in which he appeared and the ostensibly more aristocratic pursuit of hunting.

At the same time, the field of performance theory can shed useful light on the different pressures and forces to which folk drama and commercial theatre were respectively subject, thus enabling an examination of Munday’s changes to the legend which focus on theatrical practice rather than on appropriation or deterioration. Richard Schechner’s description of the different uses of time in traditional theatre and in non-traditional performance can be applied as much to the folk dramas of the sixteenth century as to the twentieth-century avant-garde to which Schechner himself refers: indeed, the medieval and early modern Robin Hood tradition is implicitly characterised by performativity. In particular, the combats and contests which persist throughout both the texts and the May Games associated with Robin Hood demonstrate the participatory energies of the folk tradition, and it is therefore interesting to see how Munday attempts to translate this recurring motif of combat onto the formal stage. While we can see Munday’s strategies as a theatrical writer as a kind of poaching from popular culture, therefore, by noting Munday’s episodic dramatic structure and his deliberate incorporation of ballad material into *The Downfall* in particular, we can also identify that his deliberate generic hybridity is, not a failure, but part of the play’s overall experiment with form. Like other playwrights at the Rose engaged in developing a popular theatre, in *The Downfall*, Munday attempts an

innovative reworking of folk material which engages with his audience’s expectations, not in order to appropriate Robin Hood, but to recreate his legend afresh. In this paper, I will therefore outline and examine the late medieval and early modern May Games associated with Robin Hood, with their emphasis on communality and improvisational performance, before examining how in *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington* Anthony Munday adapts folk drama for the stage, reframing their physical performativity in the contexts of both commercial theatrical convention, and early modern popular balladry.

I. Community and Combat in the Ballads and Folk-Plays

As far as it is possible to piece together from the evidence which remains, the medieval Robin Hood tradition contained a number of distinct strands, comprising ballads, short plays, and calendar customs, the mutual influence or inter-relationship of which is difficult to establish with any real clarity. The first texts to survive date to no earlier than the fifteenth century, and comprise of two medium-length manuscript ballads (*Robin Hood and the Monk* and *Robin Hood and the Potter*), one longer printed ballad (*A Gest of Robyn Hode*, printed in Antwerp in around 1510), and a fragmentary manuscript playtext known as *Robyn Hod and the Shryff off Notyngham* attributed to the papers of Sir John Paston. In addition, two further playtexts very similar in tone to the manuscript fragment were appended to William Copland’s 1560 edition of the *Gest*, described on the title page as “verye proper to be played in May Games”; and the Percy Folio (dated from the mid-seventeenth century) contains a final ballad, *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, which is usually also thought to originate from the fifteenth century.

Meanwhile, in his comprehensive survey of parish records, David Wiles has painted a clear picture of a cluster of related folk customs in which Robin Hood appeared, taking place roughly from the beginning of May through to Whitsun. In the majority of these, a young man from the community would be designated to play Robin Hood, and would function as a Lord of Misrule figure, presiding over the Morris dance, leading a procession around the local area, and handing out mock liveries to onlookers in exchange for money which would go towards the poor fund or church repairs in the local parish. From the evidence of the playtexts mentioned above and from civil records which chronicle payments made for arrows and similar items for Mayday

celebrations, we can also deduce that these celebrations often included feats of strength, archery contests, and semi-improvised folk dramas: according to Wiles, “Combat always made for a popular spectator sport. . . . While fighting with the quarter-staff or sword and buckler had a perennial appeal, one type of contest that had a special place in the Robin Hood game was archery” (32). The combination of material from Robin Hood tales with sports, processions, and spectacles would no doubt have made for a major event in the local calendar, and one appealing not only to a community’s sense of narrative tradition, but also to the more general pleasure taken from both viewing and participating in competitive events.

As noted above, it is difficult to establish a clear sense of chronology in the development of the tradition, and it is not my intention here to speculate about the origins of the legend or its early incarnations: the paucity of extant texts, and their appearance at least a century after the first written references to the outlaw, render such an exercise speculative at best.² Scholars continue to disagree as to whether the Robin Hood games preceded or were based on the ballads; however, more significant for the purposes of this paper is the clear shared emphasis on performativity, and in particular on competition and combat. As Stephen Knight notes, “dramatic interaction, a conflict performed, is the centre of most of the ballads and plays, and theatre is close to the core of the whole tradition” (*Complete Study* 3). While naturally many Robin Hood tales contain skirmishes between the outlaws and their enemies, more striking is the recurrence of (more or less) amicable contests throughout these texts. Thus *Robin Hood and the Monk* opens with Robin Hood and Little John attempting to resolve a dispute by “shet[ing]. . . . Both at buske [bush] and brome [shrub]” (1.48); *Robin Hood and the Potter* includes both a swordfight between the two titular characters, and a formal “schotyng” (1.169) match organised by the Sheriff of Nottingham; Robin and Guy of Gisborne “shoote the prickes” (1.114) before fighting with swords; *Robyn Hod and the Shryff off Notyngnam* involves several contests of shooting, stone-throwing, tossing wooden axles, and two wrestling matches before the final swordfight at which Robin defeats the unnamed Knight; while *Robin Hood and the Friar* and *Robin Hood and the Potter* also include combats between the titular characters.³

² Knight provides a chronological list of references up to 1600 (*Complete Study* 262-88).

³ For all references to the ballads cited, cf. Knight and Ohlgren.

Richard Robynson's description of his childhood experience in the 1550s draws together both the emphasis on physical competition, the spirit of camaraderie evoked by the customs, and the official sponsorship which allowed them to take place:

My self remembreth of a childe in Contreie natiue mine:
 A *May* game was of *Robyn-hood* and of his traine that time
 To traine vp young men, striplings and, eche other younger
 childe
 In shooting, yearely this with solempne feast was by the Guylde,
 Or Brother hood of Townsmen done, with sport, with ioy, and
 loue
 To proffet which in present tyme, and afterward did proue.
 (Robynson L4^v)

Robynson's subtitle, "a threefold assertion frendly in fauour and furtherance of English archery at this day," and his emphasis on "train[ing] vp young men," makes clear the social functions of initiation and military preparation also associated with these activities. Given the context of genuine competition, one can imagine that the outcome of the central combat in the customary dramas was not always scripted, but was rather an actual contest, again emphasising their improvisational nature and the centrality of several forms of performance, not merely acting. Either way, evidently these were thoroughly community-centred affairs, designed to promote local cohesion and to raise money for local issues. As Wiles suggests, "the young men who played Robin Hood were pillars of the establishment" (15), often coming from families involved in civil administration, and going on to hold such office in later life. The gathering itself revolved around symbolic inclusion: participants would pay to be part of Robin Hood's band and to wear his livery, usually badges made out of paper, although such donations would sometimes be rather less than voluntary, perhaps even exacted through half-serious violence. According to the famous account of Mayday customs provided by Phillip Stubbes in 1583, spectators who refused to contribute would be "mocked, & flouted at, not a little" (M3^r), and Wiles provides examples of some rather more boisterous extortions (14-15). These events were clearly opportunities for communities to define and reassert their identities, allowing us to see both customary drama in general, and the Robin Hood tradition more

specifically, as a narrative opportunity through which, as Wolfgang Kraus puts it, identity and belonging are “negotiated, tested, confirmed, rejected or qualified,” “produc[ing] ‘readability’ for oneself as well as for others” (108-09). The determined inclusion of the most potentially disenfranchised social group (young men) is balanced by the emphatic exclusion of those members of the community who refuse to participate: as David Underdown has shown, when seventeenth-century Puritans began to express distaste for the festivities, the key accusation levelled at them was that they were divisive and aimed to sow discord among neighbours (54, 143, 172). Despite the potential for festive customs occasionally to spill over into social protest then, for the most part these events express a kind of ritual of belonging, and this should prompt us to be wary when examining Munday’s handling of his Robin Hood material: if the legend took its meaning from its importance in rituals and stories of belonging, then we must ask what London audiences would have taken from the plays. For the remainder of this paper, I therefore wish to discuss the Munday plays, and how they transform these traditions for the theatre.

II. “Noble Roberts Wrong”: Anthony Munday and the Question of Adaptation

Unfortunately, to date the Huntington plays have met with near-universal critical disapprobation. Jeffrey Singman voices a common view when he states that they are “an artistically uninspired attempt to exploit a story already so popular that it could not fail to generate an audience, regardless of the actual quality of the text” (64-65), while M. A. Nelson simply sees Robin’s gentrification in the Huntington plays as a kind of slavish adherence to classical tragedy, occasioned because “Elizabethan playwrights had not yet learned that a good tragedy could be written with a bourgeois protagonist” (121). Despite the balanced and neutral tone which characterises the rest of his book, Stephen Knight also characterises Munday’s adaptation as “a masterly redirection of the story in terms of the interest of those who ruled the contemporary theatre: . . . Munday, in this as in his espionage activities, is working closer to the interests of the powerful” (*Robin Hood* 123). The implication is that by adapting popular material, Munday was somehow betraying his audience, deliberately writing only to appeal to the elite spectators, better versed in literature and in English history; or, even worse,

attempting to brainwash the hapless playgoers on behalf of the state. The audience, in this figuration, is depicted as entirely passive, lacking any role or agency in their consumption of the material produced for them onstage. Not only the plays' theatrical context and purpose, but the role of consumer choice, are ignored by this approach: yet if early modern audiences felt that more literary treatments of Robin Hood had despoiled their much-loved narrative and festive traditions, one imagines that they would not have attended the plays or bought the playtexts. In fact they demonstrably did both, as is clear from the commissioned sequel to *The Downfall* and the publication of both texts soon afterwards, by no means standard practice in the period and an indication of the popularity and commercial success of the plays (Gurr 97-99). Nor can this necessarily be dismissed as expressive of a cultural divide between sophisticated Londoners and their less sophisticated rural counterparts: given the high volume of immigration in the period into the capital from the rest of the country, no such assumptions can be made regarding the make-up of theatre audiences. Laura Gowing has estimated that between 1580 and 1640, the population of London tripled from something around 115,000 to around 350,000; using witness autobiographical information from court hearings, she notes that only 9.5% of London witnesses were living at the time of the hearing in the parish of their birth, compared to 45% outside of London. In other words, "London was a city of migrants," an important point to consider when distinguishing between the popular pastimes still practised around the country, and their depiction in the commercial theatres of the capital (Gowing 12-20).⁴ This is particularly important when we consider the centrality of such communal activities in the construction of identity and belonging, mentioned above in reference to the May Games: such a reading of these performance acts must in turn inflect how we imagine London playgoers approached the refashioning of their popular culture.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Munday's Robin does present a rather altered figure from the bandit of medieval legend. Although for modern scholars the most commented-upon detail of these plays is Robin's new role as a dispossessed noble, just as significant is Munday's decision to exonerate

⁴ Knight lists around two dozen references English and Scottish from the 1580s and 1590s alluding to, recording, or occasionally prohibiting Robin Hood games (Knight, *Complete Study* 282-86); at the time that Munday was writing, the practice was clearly still very much alive.

Robin completely, and paradoxically, of any form of criminality. At the opening of *The Downfall*, Robin is exiled for excessive debt by the allies of his deceitful uncle. Crucially, the only crime committed by Munday's newly decriminalised outlaw is poor self-governance. Robin's profligacy is mentioned on a number of occasions: he is, according to his enemies, "wastfull," "an unthrift" who "revell[s], wast[s] and spende[s]" and has therefore been "[u]ndoone by ryot."⁵ Even this trait, however, is presented as a result of his generosity and his desire for communal approbation: he is "liberall" (A3^v), a "kinde hoste" (B3^r), and he spends the rest of his time onstage atoning through his "downfall." Far from embracing the peripheral life of the outlaw, then, he spends the play longing for the restoration of his settled life, peace with his enemies, and honest married companionship with his sweetheart. His former life is restored at the end of *The Downfall* by the return of King Richard from the Crusades, but he is promptly murdered by his old enemies in the first act of *The Death*, the remainder of which deals with King John's ignoble and adulterous pursuit of Robin's grieving widow.

I argue that many of the innovations identified by critics of the play are necessitated by the different mode of performance required by the commercial stage. Outlining his ground-breaking performance theory, Richard Schechner contrasts the different trajectories and forms deployed by conventional theatre (which he characterises as "triangular" in plot shape) and more modern "happenings" (identified by Schechner as "open"). In fact, his outline of the latter works remarkably well as a description of the folk dramas discussed above, and therefore presents a useful means of comparing the Robin Hood games with more literary texts such as the Huntington plays. Amongst other features, Schechner outlines the "triangular" play's emphasis on story, plot, and characterisation; its use of (more or less) linear time; and its momentum towards resolution. On the other hand, "open" plays make use of games and rules, rhythms and patterns; time is circular or non-present in these dramas, and their emphasis is on activity rather than action (Schechner 25-26). It should be noted that the notion of the circularity of time is particularly interesting when considering the folk plays, given their close connection to an established, cyclical calendar of festal events, and their depiction of a central combat or contest which, once enacted, does little to revise the dynamics in place at the beginning of the drama. Rather than depicting a trajectory as in a

⁵ Munday, *The downfall* A4^v, F2^r, D4^r, G4^v; all further quotations embedded in the text.

theatre play, these performances merely present vignettes “drawn from life-rhythms . . . [which] do not have beginnings, middles, and ends in the Aristotelian sense. One rhythmic cycle is completed only to begin again: nothing is resolved” (Schechner 21-22): indeed, in the “newe playe” appended Copland’s *Geste*, the text of *Robin Hood and the Friar* leads straight on to *Robin Hood and the Potter* without break, and the latter ends abruptly, without even suggesting who wins in the titular characters’ fight.

Viewed in this light, it is unsurprising that Munday’s play bears little immediate resemblance to its precursors, given the different modes of drama which it deploys. Nevertheless, I would argue that *The Downfall* in fact features a number of recognisable attempts to recreate the episodic atmosphere of the May Games, while still modifying the traditional source material to the demands of the stage. The action is framed by an entertainment supposed to be taking place at the court of Henry VIII; the poet laureate John Skelton and the fictional Sir John Eltham are rehearsing a play written by the former, which is to be acted before the King. While the framing device establishes the courtly context for which Robin’s “Tragedie” will be performed, on the other hand it also emphasises that the unfolding action is a (fairly extempore) rehearsal, and as such the characters themselves seem constantly aware that they are merely performers. Shocked at the news of his imminent banishment, Robin tries to hide his distress by pretending that he is planning a performance:

. . . at greate or nuptiall feastes,
 With Comicke sportes, or Tragicke stately plaies,
 Wee use to recreate the feasted guests

 I only meane
 (The more to honour our right noble friends)
 Myselfe in person to present some Sceanes
 Of tragick matter, or perchance of mirth. (B1^v)

His uncertainty regarding whether the action will be “tragick matter” or mirth reflects the rapid shifts of tone within the plays, and appears to suggest that everything which follows will be more “sporte” than reality.

Similarly, Skelton (who is playing Friar Tuck) frequently breaks down into elaborate and inappropriate digressive laments on the corruption of the

times in “ribble rabble rimes, Skeltonicall” (I2^r). The close association in the early modern mind between the historical poet laureate and Skeltonic verse, which was “marked by short lines, irregular meter and rhymes, and alliteration” (Knight and Ohlgren 387-88), provides constant, evidently comical reminders of the framing device within which the action takes place. Eltham’s exasperated expostulations reveal Skelton’s forgetfulness of his own role and his fellow actors’:

Eltham: Stoppe, master Skelton; whither will you runne?
 Skelton: Gods pittie, Sir John Eltham, Little John,
 I had forgotten myself; but to our play. (D3^r)

Both the constructedness of the play and its deliberately improvisational air are emphasised and foregrounded, ensuring that the linear time of the play is disrupted and destabilised. Despite the “tragick matter” of Robin’s story-arc, the play nevertheless has the holiday atmosphere of a play-game.

Although the boisterous folk customs discussed above are notably absent, this is also highlighted in another such anxious interruption. Halfway through the play, Eltham takes Skelton aside to express his concerns about the unusual direction the plot is taking:

Me thinks I see no jeasts of Robin Hoode,
 No merry morices of Frier Tuck,
 No pleasant skippings up and downe the wodde,
 No hunting songs, no coursing of the bucke. (I2^r)

Skelton responds that King Henry has approved his subject matter, and that “merry jeasts, they have bene showne before,” apparently recalling a rather different May game in which Henry VIII famously participated. Edward Hall’s chronicle describes how on May Day in 1516, the King and Queen rode to the aptly-named Shooters Hill, where

they espied a co[m]pany of tall yomen, clothed all in grene with grene whodes & bowes & arrowes Then one of them, which called him selfe Robyn hood, came to the kyng, desyring him to se his men shoote, & the kyng was co[n]tent. Then he whisteled, & al the. ii.C. archers shot & losed at once, & then he whisteled

agayne, & they likewise shot agayne, their arrowes whisteled by crafte of the head, so that the noyes was straunge and great, & mucche pleased the kynge the quene and all the company. . . . Then Robyn hood desyred the kynge and quene to come into the grene wood, & to se how the outlawes lyue. . . . [T]hey came to the wood vnder shoters hil, and there was an Arber made of boowes. . . . Then the kyng and quene sate doune, & were serued with venyson and wyne by Robyn hood and his men, to their great contentacion. (3K2^v-3^r)

Although Henry VIII’s May Day was undoubtedly a far more rehearsed and formalised performance than was usual at a local level, it is notable that this royal Maying nevertheless deploys the same emphasis on performativity. One imagines that this staged display of archery was not dissimilar to the physical contests that took place at a local level, although participants in the latter might not have been treated to venison in their celebratory feasts. While critics have interpreted Skelton’s deferral to royal authority as a defensive gesture, or a disavowal of more traditional manifestations of Robin Hood, the possible allusion here to Henry VIII’s own Maying serves to contextualise the play alongside customary dramas. Given Skelton’s repeated commentary on the corruption of the times, there is perhaps a suggestion that the “merry jeasts” belong to an earlier time, but his own double removal from the Elizabethan playgoers, as a historical Henrician poet orchestrating a fiction set in the twelfth century, confuses any rejection of festive Robin Hood as much as it does the apparent nostalgia.

In a further complication, the Rose’s customers have already been identified with the inset play’s kingly audience, and implicated in the monarch’s approval of the play’s new subject matter: in his brief summary of the action of the play, Skelton promises “The manner and escape [of Robin’s outlawry] you all shall see,” prompting Eltham’s confused interjection: “Which all, good Skelton?” Skelton promptly responds with a sweeping metatheatrical gesture to the audience itself: “Why, all these lookers on, / Whom, if wee please, the King will sure be pleas’d” (A3^v). If the “jeasts” and “merry morices” of popular custom can be read as expressions of communal identity, Skelton here envisages a new community; the Rose’s audience are invited both to acknowledge the distance of the commercial theatre from folk drama, and to recognise at the same time how invested in popular ritual are

theatrical culture and courtly entertainments such as Henry's Maying (and indeed, the staging at court of the Munday plays). Further, however, I would argue that Munday goes further in constructing a shared identity for readers and viewers of *The Downfall*, through his use of ballad material with which the Rose's audience would be familiar and his projection of many features of the Robin Hood tradition (yeoman status, hunting, combat, and disguise) onto various characters in the play.

III. Staging Popular Tradition: Balladry and Disguise in *The Downfall*

Despite Eltham's concern and Skelton's disavowal, Mayday traditions and the Robin Hood ballads are far less distant from Munday's texts than would at first appear. With his newly gentrified status and sensitive conscience, Robin might no longer belong in the Greenwood, but the plays themselves appear to be struggling to contain the more anarchic energy of their traditional sources. Many recognisable aspects of these are in fact projected onto Scarlet and Scathlock, the pair of outlaw brothers whom Munday elaborates from a single character from the ballads. Already outlawed for unspecified crimes when first introduced to the action, they come to replace the role of the medieval poacher and highwayman. Describing their outlaw's life before Robin joined them, Scarlet claims that dressed in "Kendall greene" and carrying "sharpe arrowes" and "bowes [which] did never misse," for "ful seaven years . . . wealthy Sherewood was our heritage" where "we raigned uncontrolde" (E4^o). Notably, Sherewood is *their* heritage, and they too belong to the outlaw life. Amongst their friends they number other ballad heroes associated with the Robin Hood tradition, but not present in this play: George a Greene, "Wakefields Pinner," and even the "Potter tough and strong" of the ballad and playtext. Their relationship to medieval ballad, their outlawry, and their martial prowess are inextricably connected, and somehow out of place in the Earl of Huntington's rather genteel band of merry men. As Scathlock's ensuing story makes clear, the brothers themselves are no strangers to the role of public combatant:

In merry Mansfield, on a wrestling day,
Prizes there were, and yeomen came to play.
My brother Scarlet and myselfe were twaine.
Many resisted, but it was in vaine,

For of them all we wonne the mastery,
 And the gilt wreathes were given to him and mee. (E4^v-F1^r)

Knight and Ohlgren point out (157) the recurrence of wrestling in late medieval ballads and romances: both wrestling and archery matches feature, for example, in Chaucer's parody of rhymed romances, "The Tale of Sir Thopas." It was also a key feature of festive events (Ruff 171). Given the centrality of wrestling matches and other displays of physical ability to the earlier texts and rituals, it is deeply significant that it here appears in the brothers' backstory rather than in that of the exiled lord: this is clearly a *deliberate* reattribution of the traditional material. Indeed, Robin even refuses to kill deer, instructing Scarlet and Scathlock to "wend ye to the Greenwod merrily" to hunt, while he and Marian "wait, within our bower, your bent bowes spoiles" (F1^v). His description of the winding of horns as "a sad knell for the fearefull deere" (E4^v) slips almost into the bathetic, suggesting perhaps that the newly passive Robin's inactivity should be seen as comical, a calculated counterpoint to the robust and boisterous outlaw hero of tradition.

Nevertheless, it is apparent from his depiction of the brothers that Munday had no wish to reject the medieval tradition, or to omit entirely the figure of the bold yeoman outlaw. Through the figures of Scarlet and Scathlock, the ostensibly suppressed ballads and May Games resurface, and in particular the much more improvisational forms of popular performance which they describe and represent. Again, we can interpret this as a function of Munday's dual attempt to acknowledge and appeal to the shared popular culture of his audience on the one hand, and on the other to adapt an open, informal style of dramaturgy to the formality of the stage play. Schechner distinguishes between "acting the events" and "becoming the events": the combatants of the May Games and ballads are pure action, "characteristics" rather than "characters" (25-26). While Munday creates a protagonist who, in keeping with theatrical convention, experiences the tensions and emotional turbulence demanded by generic convention, Scarlet and Scathlock represent the being-in-action, the performativity and energy of the informal dramas and ballads.

Another aspect of the early tradition which foregrounds performance and unreality is the central motif of disguise, and it is therefore fitting that *The Downfall* is full of disguises and misrecognitions, which serve a number of functions. In this, of course, the play reflects the wider Robin Hood tradition:

all of the extant medieval ballads, for example, involve episodes in which either Robin Hood or Little John assumes some form of disguise. Unusually, however, the majority of such episodes in *The Downfall* depict Robin's enemies, rather than his friends, orchestrating the deception; and this is in keeping with how the play thematises the "false" deception of Robin's enemies as replacement for (or projection of) any wrongdoing or criminality on Robin's part.⁶ Thus of seven instances in the play, only two involve Robin hiding his own identity: the first of these is his semi-comical exchange with Prince John as he escapes from his former home, and Warman immediately identifies him: "here he comes, / Disguised like a citizen me thinkes" (C2^r). On the second occasion, dressed as an old man, he rescues Scarlet and Scathlock from hanging. Both deceptions are arguably necessitated by the plot, and are motivated by either self-preservation, or a heroic rescue attempt: Munday's Earl is certainly no trickster hero. Robin's description of his plan to rescue the brothers is fitting: "I will change my habit, and disguise" (D3^r), he tells Little John, suggesting through the pun on "habit" that deception is not characteristic of this particular Robin Hood.

Conversely, the other disguises of the play tend to afford opportunities either for comedy or for scenes of staged combat which appear far closer to festive and ballad tradition than Robin's own escapades, as well as frequently involving elaborately doubled deceptions and counter-deceptions. In contrast to Robin's change of "habit," a parallel verbal slippage characterises these ruses, associating the disguises of the antagonists with deception: the word "shift" appears seven times, punning on its various meanings as clothing, stratagem, role, movement. In one example, Queen Elinor has supported Robin's undoing because, besotted with him herself, she wishes to divide him from Maid Marian. Pretending friendship, she suggests that "for a shift," she and Marian swap costumes, supposedly in order to facilitate the latter's escape from John, whose romantic interests have likewise prompted him to allow Robin's downfall; in fact, Elinor intends to trick Robin into escaping with her instead. "[G]et thee in," she urges Marian, "and shift of thy attire"; luckily, however, Marian sees through the ploy, and assures the audience "My Robert shall have knowledge of this shift" (B3^v-4^r). The layering of deceptions adds further to the episodic feel to the play and reveals its workings, once again

⁶ The word "False" describes Robin's enemies seven times in the play; cf. A3^v, B3^r, B4^v, G3^r, I3^r, and K1^r.

emphasising its artificiality: interestingly, Skelton is the first character to speak of shifts, emphasising his role of play-maker and repeating his appeal to the audience's forbearance: "My shift is long, for I play Frier Tucke, . . . I desire, / Yea would not admire [wonder about], / My rime so I shift" (A3^v). Given my suggestion above that Scarlet and Scathlock take over the outlaw energies of the Robin Hood tradition, it is significant that they too, like the medieval Robin, are associated with "shifts," in distinction from their noble master: Warman threatens them "as yee liv'd by shifts, shall die with shame" (D3^v).

The overriding characteristic of disguises in the play, however, is their ineffectiveness. In one of the more bizarre episodes of the play, Friar Tuck hatches a convoluted plot to dress himself as a pedlar and lead the Prior of York and Sir Doncaster to Robin's forest hideaway: as soon as he meets Robin he reveals his identity and the trap is reversed upon the villains. Despite the Friar's role in this scheme, overall the episode reflects a recurring pattern in the disguise scenes: all are initiated by the villains of the play, and all are comic failures. Ely dresses as a woman in order to escape, but he is recognised because he looks like "a monster," a "bearded witch" (E2^r); the moral dangers of disguise are later alluded to when Ely is again recognised, this time by Friar Tuck, as "a wolfe in a sheepes skinne" (H4^v). In another failed disguise plot, Munday engages with but crucially modifies the motif of the king in disguise, a widespread feature in ballads and folktales (as discussed by Helgerson 231-32; Burke, *Popular Culture* 152). Although the king's arrival in disguise is a common occurrence in Robin Hood ballads, in *The Downfall* it is not King Richard, but Prince John, who conceals his identity and attempts to infiltrate Robin's company:

Why this is somewhat like, now may I sing,
As did the Wakefield Pinder in his note;
At Michaelmas commeth my covenant out,
My master gives me my fee.
Then, Robin, Ile weare thy Kendall greene,
And wend to the greenewodde with thee.
But for a name now, John, it must not bee,
Alreadie Little John on him attends.
Greeneleaf? Nay surely there's such a one alreadye.
Well, Ile be Wodnet, hap what happen may.

Here comes a greene cote (good lucke be my guide).
Some sodaine shift might helpe me to prouide. (K2)

His “shift” is quickly tripped up when he asks Scathlock after his “noble master, Earle of Huntington” (K2^v), thus revealing his ignorance of the social code of the Greenwood, according to which

no man must presume to call our master,
By name of Earle, Lord, Baron, Knight, or Squire,
But simply by the name of Robin Hoode. (F1^r)

This immediately arouses the suspicions of Scathlock and Friar Tuck and John reacts aggressively, challenging both men to a swordfight. He proves too much for Scathlock, who eventually entreats John to “Stay, let us breath” (K3^r), but leaves off fighting Friar Tuck upon the appearance of Maid Marian, who instantly recognises him. Despite his wrongdoing in this play and its sequel, John’s martial prowess goes some way towards recuperating him: Tuck admiringly offers his hand, saying “thou art a proper man, / And for this mornings worke, by Saints above, / Be ever sure of Frier Tucks true love” (K2-K3). Just as in Henry VIII’s Maying, or in the activities of Robin Hood as Summer King, combat and violent play feeds into the affirmations of royal, national, and communal identity: the conflict begins because John fails to recognise the Greenwood’s social rules, but ultimately allows his incorporation into the community. Competition is here a redemptive social activity, and also in a sense initiatory, just as we saw with Richard Robinson’s May Games. Nevertheless, it is important to also acknowledge that the traditional denouement of the disguised king plot—the reinstatement of the wronged hero—is left to Richard, and tragedy inevitably follows this comic resolution. Robin might be restored to favour by the sudden, almost miraculous appearance of Richard, but he is still murdered immediately afterwards, at the beginning of *The Death* which picks up exactly where *The Downfall* ends. Robin never returns from his uncomfortable exile, but dies in the forest which has been, not a haven or domain, but his tragedy. He remains one of the few characters who does not participate in the combats, disguisings, and role-playing of customary drama, and perhaps it is this which is ultimately his downfall.

IV. Conclusion: "New Games" at the Rose Theatre

From the above discussion, it is apparent that in the act of adapting and reimagining the Robin Hood tradition, Munday did substantially alter the material upon which he was drawing. Nevertheless, the experimentation with popular culture in these plays problematises a view of Munday's Robin Hood as merely appropriative. Alongside the framing devices, combats, and episodic elements which Munday utilises in allusion to the informal structures of customary drama, the ballad material in the plays also engages with the innovative theatrical practice of the so-called Henslowe playwrights writing for the Rose in the late sixteenth century. Recent scholarship has done much to illuminate how the Admiral's Men are invested in a series of experiments with genre and staging which are as concerned with participating in the culture(s) and expectations of the audience, as with the literary requirements of classical genres. Tracey Hill identifies a "trend" for disguise plays in late sixteenth-century London, which she suggests was initiated by Munday himself in the early 1590s (56). Andrew Gurr makes the appealing suggestion that this trend was in fact an ingenious solution to a problem which both the Admiral's Men and the Chamberlain's Men faced following the establishment, in 1594, of a duopoly agreement allowing only these two companies to stage commercial plays in London. Gurr notes that in the following decade, the two companies faced an unprecedented predicament, in the form of a demanding but captive audience increasingly familiar with their actors, repertoires, and stage properties. He suggests that in response, within a year the Admiral's Men

were prompting their writers to give them plays that exploited the most obvious feature of the whole business of acting, disguise. Their customers were getting used to seeing the players change their dress daily. Now they could exploit that expectation with new games. (51)

If we follow Gurr in seeing the Admiral's Men as profoundly inventive in their constant production of innovative material for the stage, then we need not see the Huntington plays as exploitative of folk culture, but can instead recognise their deliberate engagement with popular culture and tastes.

In the face of critical disdain for these texts, it is perhaps prudent to concede that the attempted blending of pastoral, disguise comedy, historical material drawn from ballads, and high tragedy is not entirely successful. Munday seems to want both an adventuring earl and a tragic hero, both a rearticulation of a folk tradition for the popular theatre, and a translation of that material into more literary fare. Nevertheless, this genre “clearly . . . hit the public taste, for plays of this kind remained part of the popular repertory until 1642” (Hunter 364). Moreover, while Robin’s gentrification is often seen as a feeble attempt at appropriation, I have attempted to show that Munday is acutely conscious of the features of the Robin Hood tradition which, although not translating exactly to the commercial stage, allow him to experiment with the chronology and characterisation of *The Downfall*. Richard Schechner’s work on performance theory reminds us that classical theatre is a long way from the non-linear uses of time in customary drama, their emphasis on improvisational forms such as combat, their barely sketched out characters and emphasis on action over plot trajectory. However, these are features to which *The Downfall* can be seen to allude with its staged reiteration of its own artificiality, the deliberate interruptions to its story arc, and its comical, episodic uses of combat and disguise. Finally, that the Huntington plays were aimed at, and successful with, a popular audience seems beyond doubt: and in light of this assertion, a reevaluation of Munday’s positive contribution to the folk legend of Robin Hood is, as I have demonstrated, both well justified and long overdue.

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