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Samuel Smithson (fl. 1655–90): The Forgotten Broadside Ballad Author of “Robin Hood and Maid Marian” (c.1660–96)

Stephen Basdeo

SUMMARY: This article recovers Samuel Smithson as the likely author of the Robin Hood broadside “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” challenging the long neglect of professional seventeenth-century ballad writers. It begins by noting that earlier editors such as Joseph Ritson and later scholars like Dobson and Taylor dismissed the ballad as lacking literary merit, but argues that such judgments obscure the historical importance of its author. By tracing the initials “S.S.” and drawing on Donald Wing’s bibliographical work, the article identifies Smithson as a prolific mid- to late seventeenth-century writer of love songs, political pieces, jest books, folklore literature, and theological works. It then suggests that Smithson’s Robin Hood ballad was probably influenced by Martin Parker and perhaps Munday, and was most likely composed after 1660. More broadly, the article argues that Robin Hood literature was not merely passively transmitted through oral tradition but actively reshaped by identifiable professional writers such as Smithson.

INTRODUCTION

When Joseph Ritson was compiling *Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* (1795), he stated that

“This ballad, which has never been inserted in any of the publications intitled *Robin Hood’s Garland* (and, perhaps, was not worth inserting here), is given from an old black letter copy in the collection of Anthony a Wood. Its full title is, *A famous battle between Robin Hood and Maid Marian; declaring their love, life, and liberty. Tune, Robin Hood Reviv’d.*”¹

In the twentieth century, when R.B. Dobson and J. Taylor were compiling a new anthology of Robin Hood ballads, they were equally dismissive of the text:

Despite its complete lack of any literary merit, “Robin Hood and Maid Marian” deserves inclusion in this selection as the most extreme and implausible attempt ever made to combine the usual theme of Robin

¹ Joseph Ritson, *Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads, Now Extant, Relative to that Celebrated English Outlaw*, vol. II (London: T. Egerton and J. Johnson, 1795), 157.

Hood as a lover with the more traditional motif of his single-handed fight against an opponent unaware of his real identity.²

Debates about the ballad's literary merit (or lack of) are best left for another place. Such opinions are always subjective. What interests me here is the life of the man who wrote the ballad, and whether we can tease out any details of it and restore a forgotten authors to his rightful place in the Robin Hood literary tradition. After all, if authors such as Joseph Ritson (1752–1803), Walter Scott (1771–1832), and Pierce Egan (1814–80) are rightly credited for their literary labours, so too should the broadside balladists be when they can be identified.

It is not always easy to identify a broadside ballad author. But luckily for us in the twenty-first century, the man who wrote "Robin Hood and Maid Marian" also signed his initials at the end. The initials were "S.S." The man to whom those initials belonged, as identified by the twentieth-century ballad scholar Donald Wing, was a prolific songwriter in the mid-seventeenth century named Samuel Smithson.

SAMUEL SMITHSON: LOVE-SONG WRITER, JESTER, ROYALIST, AND THEOLOGIAN

It is difficult to provide anything approaching a full biography of Samuel Smithson. He was a man of some fame by 1656 because he is referred to as part of "Glorious three" of contemporary ballad writers in a poem composed in honour of the more famous balladeer Martin Parker (who also wrote *A True Tale of Robin Hood* in 1631):

Ye glorious three
Who grasp the Poles of Star-crown'd Poesie;
Has som Cask-piercing Youth poison'd your wine
With wicked Laethe? Did you ever dine
On Turnep-tops, without or Salt, or Butter,
That amongst all your Canzonets, or clutter
You fail'd to mention this deceased Robbin.³

The "glorious three" here refers to Smithson, another ballad writer named Humphrey Crouch, and another named Laurence Price (who wrote three Robin Hood ballads in the 1650s, and a post on him is forthcoming). For a long time, Smithson's broadsides had been erroneously attributed, by J.W. Ebsworth, to another ballad writer named Samuel Shepherd.⁴ Wing corrected Ebsworth's mistakes and we now have a fuller picture of his output, the themes about which he wrote being evident by the titles. Two love songs by Smithson remain extant: "A kiss of a sea-man's worth two of another. Or, The maiden's loyalty" (1655) and "Loves Mistresse or natures rarity" (1656).⁵

As a man who flourished in the middle part of the seventeenth century, he could not help but be caught up in the events of the English Civil War and the subsequent Protectorate, or dictatorship, of Oliver Cromwell. A ballad, written during Cromwell's reign, suggests that he was an enthusiastic supporter of the Cromwellian regime (or, at

² R.B. Dobson and J. Taylor, *Rymes of Robin Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw*, 3rd ed. (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 176.

³ S.F., *Death in a new dress: or Sportive funeral elegies.: Commemorating the renowned lives and lamented deaths of these eminent personages, Robbin the annyseed-water seller. Martin Parker the famous poet. Archee the late kings jester. The gentlewoman that so often travail'd up Holborn-Hill upon her bum, &c. With the celebration of some (harmless but pleasant healths) hitherto not in fashion: and other drollerical crotchets, very delightful* (London: Isaac Pridmore, 1656), not paginated.

⁴ Hyder E. Rollins, "Martin Parker: Additional Notes," *Modern Philology* 19 no. 1 (1921), 78.

⁵ Samuel Smithson, *A kiss of a sea-man's worth two of another. Or, The maiden's loyalty. The sea-man is her chosen mate. Till breath and life are out of date. To the tune of, Leave thee, &c.* (London: John Andrews, 1655), London, British Library C.20.f.14(16). ESTC R18440; ; Samuel Smithson, *Loves Mistresse or natures rarity* (London: Francis Grove, 1656) entered into the Stationers' Register on 12 March 1656. On the dating see Hyder E. Rollins, "An Analytical Index to the Ballad-Entries in the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London," *Studies in Philology* 21 no. 1 (1924), 137.

least, that he was savvy enough to know not to publish anything critical of the government).⁶ The title of the ballad is “The Parliament Routed: Or, Here’s a house to be let. I hope that England, after many Jarres, Shall be at Peace, and give no way to Warres: O Lord protect the Generall, that He May be the Agent of our Unitie.” The “general” of the title is likely to be Cromwell. The date of 1653 is given in pencil, likely added by an archivist at some point. However, we might say that this is very early or mid-1653 at most because it refers to Cromwell’s dissolution of the Rump Parliament in April of that year.

Another publication of Smithson’s reveals that he tried his hand at writing a jest, or joke, book titled *The figure of nine. Containing these nine observations, wits, fits, and fancies, jests, jibes and quiblets, with mirth, pastime and pleasure* (1662).⁷ A description of the *Figure of Nine* is given by a Victorian historian:

These “Figures” seem to have issued from the press in great numbers during the first half of the seventeenth century [...] They were for the most part published anonymously, though some of them, the Figures of Five and Seven for instance, have Parker’s initials, and in the present case we have the full name of the author. *The Figure of Nine* consists of eight leaves, the title being succeeded by “The Epistle to the Reader,” sixteen lines in verse, signed Samuel Smithson. The chief portion of the book is in prose, concluding with a song entitled “Good counsel in bad times.” The tune is Old Simon the King, which is called a “Sonnet,” but is in seven octave verses with a chorus or repetition. The whole is of a coarse and indelicate nature, and will scarcely admit of quotation. A curious collection of these rare tracts from the Figure of Three to the Figure of Seven, that of Four containing three parts, was sold in Mr. Heber’s Library, pt. iv, No. 721, for 4l. 1s. They appear to have been frequently reprinted. The present is one of the rarest of the series, and we are not aware of any other copy than this. Even the name of the author is quite unknown to all previous bibliographers.⁸

Smithson’s output was by no means limited to love songs. He was in tune with England’s “folk” culture and two copies of his adaptation of the *History of Guy of Warwick* remain extant.⁹ Finally, Smithson appears to have, in later life, tried his hand at theological writing, for a book survives titled *Christ on the Cross Suffering for Sinners* (1696).¹⁰ If we cannot assign a year for Smithson’s birth, we can, owing to the publication dates listed above, assign dates between which Smithson flourished professionally: fl. 1655–96. This is therefore a 35-year career in the publishing trade with interests spanning romance, folklore, and theology.

SMITHSON’S “ROBIN HOOD AND MAID MARIAN”

To the list of Smithson’s broadsides and books above we can also add “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” although his authorship of the ballad was completely ignored in Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren’s *Robin Hood and*

⁶ Samuel Smithson, *The Parliament Routed: Or, Here’s a house to be let. I hope that England, after many Jarres, Shall be at Peace, and give no way to Warres: O Lord protect the Generall, that He May be the Agent of our Unitie* (London: [n. pub.], 1653), Beinecke Library Rare Books and Manuscripts, BrSides By6 1653

⁷ Samuel Smithson, *The figure of nine. Containing these nine observations, wits, fits, and fancies, jests, jibes and quiblets, with mirth, pastime and pleasure. The figure of nine to you I here present and hoping thereby to give you content* (London: Thomas Vere, 1662), London, British Library 1080.e.34. ESTC R221527. A later copy of this from c.1690 survives in Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepysian Library PL 362(20). ESTC R219640.

⁸ *Remains, Historical and Literary, Connected with the Palatine Counties of Lancaster and Chester* (Manchester: Chetham Society, 1880), 245.

⁹ Smithson, Samuel, *The famous history of Guy Earl of Warwick. By Samuel Smithson. Licensed, and entered according to order* (London: F. Coles, T. Vere, J. VVright and J. Clarke, [no later than 1681]), Oxford, Bodleian Library. ESTC R8795. The printer, F. Coles, died in 1681. There is debate about Smithson’s authorship of this work but there is no evidence to support the assertion that Smithson did not write this Guy of Warwick piece.

¹⁰ Samuel Smithson, *Christ on the cross suffering for sinners: or, The sinners redemption, sanctification and exaltation, by the death and bitter passion of our blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Written by S. Smithson, and entred according to order.* (Glasgow: Robert Sanders, 1696), Edinburgh, Advocates Library. ESTC R184401.

Other Outlaw Tales (1997; rev. 2000).¹¹ Before attempting to date the broadside, it might be useful to discuss where Smithson got his information about Maid Marian. I suggest that the most immediate source was Martin Parker's *True Tale of Robin Hood*, which was first published in 1632 and republished frequently as a pamphlet (for it was too long to be a broadside) into the next century.¹²

I base this supposition upon the internal evidence for both texts and on external evidence. Robin Hood is described as the Earl of Huntingdon in both Smithson's ballad and Parker's *True Tale*, and Parker's ballad was the only other popular source in Smithson's lifetime to have elevated Robin to the peerage. Parker's text is also the only other seventeenth-century mass market text to have included a mention of Maid Marian.

Smithson also appears to have been acquainted with Martin Parker on a personal level. But Smithson was also acquainted with Anthony Munday's *Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon* and *Death of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon* (1597–98), which is the first major cultural work in the Robin Hood tradition to feature a woman called Maid Marian as Robin Hood's love interest.

What is remarkable, however, is that Smithson's ballad survives at all. The texts of a number of Robin Hood broadside ballads survive in several places. There are several extant copies of "Robin Hood and the Tanner" (1657) which survive in libraries and archives across the United Kingdom and the United States.¹³ "Robin Hood and the Tanner" also appeared in the *Forresters Manuscript* (British Library Additional MS 71558), c.1670, as well as all four of the early editions of *Robin Hood's Garland*.¹⁴ The same is true of virtually every other Robin Hood

¹¹ Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, eds., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 493.

¹² See the following: Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]*. (London: T. Cotes and F. Groves, 1632), Oxford Bodleian Library Arch. A f.83 (5); Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]*, (London: J. Clark, W. Thackeray, and T. Passinger, 1686) Oxford, Bodleian Library Wood 284 (2); Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]*. (London: [n. pub.], 1700?), San Marino, Huntington Library 142525; Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]*. (London: Aldermary Church-Yard, 1701?) Manchester, Chetham's Library 3.B.7.4.(17); Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]*. (London: Printed E. Midwinter, c.1724–29); Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]*. (London: Sympson, c.1740–80?), in a Private Collection; Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]* (London: Aldermary Church Yard, Bow-Lane, 1750?), British Library Ch.750/1; Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]* (London: Aldermary Church Yard, 1750?), Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland L.C.2732(10); Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]* (London: Aldermary Church Yard, 1750?), New York Public Library, Chapbook Coll.; Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]* (London: Aldermary Church Yard, 1750?), Morgan Library E.2.63.C; Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]* (London: Aldermary Church Yard, 1750?), London, King's College Library, Rare Books Collection PR2065.C4 FAM; Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]* (London: Aldermary Church Yard, 1750?), Oxford, OH, Miami University 1745 Chapbooks; Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]* (London: Aldermary Church Yard, 1750?), New York, Morgan Library 8219.8; Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]* (Sheffield: Printed by Francis Lister, c.1750–70?); Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]* (London, c.1780), London, British Library, 12315.aaa.7(5); Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]*. (London, 1780?), King's College Library, Rare Books Collection PR2065.C4 FAM; Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]*. (London, 1780?), Oxford, Bodleian Library HARDING C 1549(1); Martin Parker, *A true tale of Robbin [Hood]* (Nottingham: S. Tupman, 1787), British Library RB.23.a.17243; [Martin Parker], *A True Tale of Robin Hood* (London: Printed and sold in London, 1800?), British Library 1079.i.24(16); [Martin Parker], *A True Tale of Robin Hood* (Newcastle: M. Angus, c.1800), British Library 1078.i.19(11).

¹³ *Robin Hood and the tanner; or, Robin Hood met with his match: a merry and pleasant song relating the gallant and fierce combatt [sic] fought between Arthur Bland a tanner of Nottingham and Robin Hood the greatest and most noblest archer of England. The tune is, Robin Hood and the stranger* (London: Printed for W. Gilbertson, 1657), Oxford, Bodleian Library, R1630D; *Robin Hood and the tanner. Or, Robin Hood met with his match: a merry and pleasant song, Relating the gallant and fierce combate between Arthur Bland, a tanner of Nottingham, and Robin Hood the greatest archer in England. Tune is, Robin Hood and the stranger* (London: Printed for A.M. and W.O., c. 1670–97), Glasgow University Library, Coll Euing Ballads 304; *Robin Hood and the tanner. Or, Robin Hood met with his match: a merry and pleasant song, Relating the gallant and fierce combate between Arthur Bland, a tanner of Nottingham, and Robin Hood the greatest archer in England. Tune is, Robin Hood and the stranger* (London: Printed for A.M. and W.O., c. 1670–97), Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Crawford Coll. [M]; *Robin Hood and the tanner. Or, Robin Hood met with his match: a merry and pleasant song, Relating the gallant and fierce combate between Arthur Bland, a tanner of Nottingham, and Robin Hood the greatest archer in England. Tune is, Robin Hood and the stranger* (London: Printed for A.M. and W.O., c. 1670–97), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 2000 Folio 6 306; *Robin Hood and the tanner. Or, Robin Hood met with his match: a merry and pleasant song, relating the gallant and fierce combate, fought between Arthur Bland a tanner of Nottingham, and Robin Hood, the greatest archer in England. Tune is, Robin Hood and the stranger* (London: J. Wright, J. Clarke, W. Thackeray, and T. Passenger, c.1681–84), Cambridge, Magdalen College, Pepys Ballads II, 111; *Robin Hood and the tanner: or, Robin Hood met with his match; a merry and pleasant song, relating the gallant and fierce combat between Arthur a Bland, a tanner of Nottinghamshire, and Robin Hood, the greatest archer of England. Tune is, Robin Hood and the stranger, &c.* (London: Printed by and for W. O., c.1700), New York, Morgan Library PML 3469.4; *Robin Hood and Arthur-a-Bland* (London: C. Sheppard, 1791), Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce Ballads 3(125b).

¹⁴ *Robin Hood's Garland; or, Delightful Songs* (London: W. Gilbertson, 1663); *Robin Hood's garland. Containing his merry exploits, and the several fights which he, Little John, and Will. Scarlet had, upon several occasions* (London: F. Coles, T. Vere and J. Wright, 1675); *Robin Hood's garland*

broadside ballad. Even the much earlier *Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode* has a wide array of fragments and full versions remaining. There remains, however, just one single copy of “Robin Hood and Maid Marian” in the Bodleian Library.¹⁵

There is no publisher listed for this ballad which makes dating it somewhat trickier than the previous ballads listed above. Dobson and Taylor did not bother trying to assign a date to this ballad’s production; they did remark on the initials of “S.S.” but made no further comment about them.¹⁶ Neither does the ballad’s most recent critic does not speculate about its date.¹⁷ Still, Knight and Ohlgren, studying the tone and content of Smithson’s work, state that it “may well be post-Restoration” (or after 1660).¹⁸

The Bodleian Library cataloguers assign a date of c.1640 to the ballad, though there is no rationale stated for why this might be so. Certainly, there is no record of the ballad in the Stationers’ Register (in which year Edward Arber’s third volume of “transcripts” comes to an end).¹⁹ This is not to say that the Stationers’ Register is a 100% accurate source of information; “Robin Hood and Maid Marian” does not appear in subsequent volumes of Arber’s Stationers’ Register transcript either, nor does it appear anywhere in the fuller searchable online database.

Knight and Ohlgren’s date of c.1660 (or shortly afterwards) is on a firmer footing than the c.1640 date assigned by the cataloguer. As we know from our work on Thomas Robins in a previous post, the 1650s witnessed the production of new Robin Hood broadside ballads. Smithson’s work contains clear lexical crossovers with Robins’s Robin Hood ballads with phrases such as “yeomen gay” repeated. Given this information, and taking cognisance of the fact that Smithson’s last work appeared in the 1690s, I tentatively offer a suggested citation for future scholarly literature which might take the following form:

Samuel Smithson, *A famous battle between Robin Hood and Maid Marian* (London: [n. pub.], [c.1660–96]), Oxford, Bodleian Library Wood 401 (ff.21,22)

We can therefore reduce the generalised dating of the “seventeenth century” for this ballad to within a 36-year period.

SMITHSON’S PLACE IN THE ROBIN HOOD TRADITION

Folklorists have sometimes come in for a rough time in my articles. I have often raised an eyebrow at their assertions to the effect that Robin Hood ballads, and ballads more broadly, all emerged as the product of a “ballad muse.”²⁰ More romantic scholarly traditions would have us believe that the majority of these ballads came to us unadorned and unembellished from the mouths of the people before being merely *recorded* in print. This approach, which continues to persist in folklore studies (and which is sometimes reproduced in Robin Hood scholarship), results in an incomplete picture of who was involved in the *re*-production of the Robin Hood broadside tradition.

Containing his merry exploits, and the several fights which he, Little John, and Will. Scarlet had, upon several occasions (London: J.M., J. Clarke, W. Thackeray and T. Passinger, 1685); *Robin Hood’s garland Containing his merry exploits, and the several fights which he, Little John, and Will. Scarlet had, upon several occasions* (London: W. Thackeray, 1689).

¹⁵ Samuel Smithson, *A famous battle between Robin Hood and Maid Marian* (London: [n. pub.], [n.d.]), Oxford, Bodleian Library Wood 401 (ff.21,22).

¹⁶ Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood*, 176.

¹⁷ Valerie Blythe Johnson, “A Forest of Her Own: Greenwood-space and the forgotten female characters of the Robin Hood tradition,” in *Robin Hood and the Outlaw/ed Literary Canon*, ed. Lesley Coote and Valerie B. Johnson (Routledge, 2017), 33–36.

¹⁸ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 493.

¹⁹ See Edward Arber, ed., *A transcript of the registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554-1640, A.D.*, vol. 1 (London: Privately Printed, 1875).

²⁰ Francis James Child, ed. *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. III (New York: Dover Reprints, 1965), 42.

Yet Smithson's work shows that some mid-seventeenth-century Robin Hood ballads were the products of identifiable, professional authors, then the Robin Hood tradition did not simply persist in the mouths of unnamed peasants before being recorded but that it was actively *reproduced* with *new* writings.

As later editors and adaptors of Robin Hood are credited for reshaping the tradition, then consistency demands that earlier professional balladists such as Samuel Smithson be acknowledged as historical agents rather than anonymous intermediaries. The point is not to *celebrate* Smithson on aesthetic grounds, but to recognise his role within the processes of transmission and adaptation that sustained the legend. Writers such as Smithson—and Thomas Robins before him—must therefore be accounted for if we are to claim any historically responsible understanding of the Robin Hood tradition, rather than authorship reserving recognition solely for later figures such as Walter Scott and Pierce Egan.

FURTHER READING

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Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren (Medieval Institute Publications, 1997)

DR STEPHEN BASDEO (stephen.basdeo@outlook.com) is a historian and lecturer based in Leeds, United Kingdom. He has spent over a decade researching and writing about the Robin Hood legend which has culminated in the production of two books: *Robin Hood: The Life and Legend of an Outlaw* (2019) and *Discovering Robin Hood: The Life of Joseph Ritson—Gentleman, Scholar, Revolutionary* (2021). He has also produced a critical edition of Joseph Ritson's *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads* (1795) which will be published in 2026 by Routledge.