Reynolds's News and Miscellany

HISTORY, LITERATURE, POETRY, AND LITERARY CRITICISM

26 December 2025

Thomas Robins's Seventeenth-Century Robin Hood Ballads

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SUMMARY: This article introduces Thomas Robins as one of the few seventeenth-century writers whose authorship of Robin Hood ballads can be identified. A royalist broadside writer active from the 1650s, Robins also composed political, moral, love, and bawdy songs, revealing both ideological commitments and commercial instincts. The article focuses on three Robin Hood ballads attributed to him: *Robin Hood and the Beggar*, *Robin Hood and the Butcher*, and *Robin Hood's Chase*. Their repeated reprinting suggests genuine popularity, while their narratives show Robins drawing upon earlier Robin Hood traditions such as *Robin Hood and the Potter*. The essay then examines why these works survived: not because Robins was seen as a "great" author, but because collectors such as Samuel Pepys, Robert Harley, and Anthony a Wood preserved them. Robins's ballads thus illuminate both the later Robin Hood tradition and the contingent, selective processes by which popular literature enters the archive and literary history.

INTRODUCTION

"Who was the author of the collection entitled *Robin Hood's Garland*," remarked Sir John Hawkins in his magisterial *General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (1777),

> No one has yet pretended to guess. As some of the songs have in them more of the spirit of poetry than others, it is probable it is the work of various hands; that it has from time to time been varied and adapted to the phrase of the times is certain.[1]

Shrouded in mystery and lost to history—such is the fate of the names of those men and women who put pen to paper, or *quill* to paper, and decided to write, for the enjoyment of their countrymen and women, songs celebrating the life and deeds of that remarkable outlaw, Robin Hood.

Yet, there are three songs for which we, unlike Sir John Hawkins, no longer need to "pretend to guess." To three of these songs we can assign the name of an author. Modern scholarship, particularly Donald Wing's in the mid-twentieth century, has advanced our understanding of early modern music and popular literature. There are three extant seventeenth-century Robin Hood ballads for which we can assign authorship and it is a great pleasure to introduce Mr Thomas Robins.

[1] John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, vol. II (London: T. Payne, 1776), 410–11.

THOMAS ROBINS: ROYALIST

Thomas Robins was a seventeenth-century ballad writer and printer whose initials, "T.R.", appear on a number of broadsides—single sheets of paper with song lyrics on them—issued between the 1650s and 1680s. Although no full biography of Robins has yet been written (and is never likely to be), surviving evidence indicates a few facts that we can work with: he was active as a ballad writer from at least 1654; he likely hailed from Derbyshire; and he was a committed royalist, a religious and political allegiance reflected in much of his output.

Robins's earliest known work is *Jack the Plough-Lad's Lamentation* (1654), a moralising commentary on the abolition of the monarchy and the sad effect that the event had upon the common people:

> And as for us Plough-men as well as the rest,
> Much sorrow comes to us: yet for us now pray,
> We do not withstand, but must pay with the best,
> If for it we work, I say, both night and day:
> To the Plough and Cart with a heavy heart,
> To stir up our ground, and to save our Grain;
> So small is our share that fals to our part,
> Would God that my Master would come home again.[2]

The wish "that my Master would come home again" is repeated at the close of each stanza. Although it seems to signify very little today, the lines were a nod to a popular royalist ballad "When the King Enjoys His Own Again." That ballad, as it happens, was written by Martin Parker, who also has a connection with Robin Hood, having written *A True Tale of Robin Hood* (1632).

Other religious and admonitory pieces followed, such as *England's Gentle Admonition* (c.1679), suggesting a writer engaged with the political and spiritual anxieties of the later Stuart period. In this piece, he complains that

> So many Sects now in England are,
> We all stand need to have a care,
> That we be not catcht within the Snare
> of that Rebellious Crew:
> That would both King and State destroy,
> The Church and England to annoy,
> But God I hope will turn their joy to Mourning.[3]

Although the details of Robins's professional life remain obscure, his output encompassed more than royalist propaganda. He was a writer of love songs as well. His song "The two Joyful Lovers" tells the story of a maid who kept rebuffing her suitor until Cupid fired his arrow at her and convinced her to marry the man who had been trying to win her hand.[4] Another ballad on this theme appeared around the same time:

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[2] Thomas Robins, *Jack the plough-lads lamentation his master has forsaken the plough and the cart, which grieves poor Iack unto the heart, for night and day he doth sorely complain, and doth wish that his master would come home again* (London: Richard Burton, 1654), London, British Library, Roxburghe Ballads C.20.f.14(26).

[3] Thomas Robins, *Englands Gentle Admonition: Or, A Warning-Piece to all Sinners. From hateful Pride see thou thy heart keep clear, / From Covetousness Instruct thy Brother dear; In Innocent Blood be sure thou have no hand, The Holy Scriptures the same doth us command* (London: Printed for F. Coles, T. Vere, J. Wright, and J. Clarke, c.1679), London, British Library, Roxburghe Ballads C.20.f.10.13.

[4] Thomas Robins, *The two Joyful Lovers, or, A true pattern of Love. The Maid at first was most unkinde, Yet bore at last a faithful minde: For Cupid with his Bow and Shield. At last did force her for to yield. The Tune is, Fancies Phoenix. The second part, Being the Maidens answer to herself, being alone as*

> "The Valiant Trooper and pritty Peggy: Being a pretty new Ditty, of a gallant brave Trooper, and Peggy so pritty. He oft did complain of her unconstancy, yet afterward she proved his loving Wife to be."[5]

Once again it is Cupid who makes the woman succumb to the man's advances. Indeed, one senses a theme emerging, for another ballad, "The Scornful Maid and the Constant Young Man" tells a tale of another woman who resists a man's advances until he finally overcomes her will.[6] We do not enough about Robins's love life, but, if these songs were inspired by personal experience, perhaps his suits had been rejected a few times by women he attempted to court.

Another ballad of this class took a more ribald turn. "The Lovers Battle, being a sore Combat fought between Mars and Venus," full of double entendres, appeared around the middle of the seventeenth century. Mars is "the stoutest he that ever drew a rapier." Venus, on the other hand, has a fortress (her maidenhead, named "Cunny Castle") that can never be taken by any man's rapier.[7] Venus's words remain true till the end of the ballad when Mars never does break through the walls of Cunny Castle.

Another ribald ballad followed, titled "The merry Hoastess: or, A pretty new Ditty, composd [sic] by an Hoastess that lives in the City." Like the "Lovers Battle" before, it too was full of suggestive phrases and the hostess herself, it is hinted, has had many a lover.[8]

ROBINS THE ROBIN HOOD SONGSTER

Perhaps owing to the fact that he shared a name with England's famous outlaw, Robins wrote three Robin Hood ballads. The first of these was "Robin Hood and the Beggar" (entered into the Stationer's Register 12 March 1656), which was republished frequently by different publishers and survives in three different libraries' holdings:

> Thomas Robins, *Robin Hood and the beggar. Shewing; how Robin Hood and the beggar fought, and how he changed clothes with the beggar, and how he went a begging to Nottingham and how he saved three brethren from being hang'd for stealing of deer. To the tune of, Robin Hood and the stranger* (London: Francis Grove, c.1660), Oxford, Bodleian Library Wood 401(23)
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> ——, (London: F. Coles, T. Vere, J. Wright, 1674), London, British Library, Roxburghe Ballads C.20.f.9.(20-21)
>
> ——, (London: I. Clarke, W. Thackeray, and T. Passinger, c.1684–86), Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepys Ballads 2.113

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she supposed, having a Cittern in her hand, she began to sing as followeth: To the same Tune (London: Sarah Tyus, c.1664–92), Edinburgh, National Library Scotland, Crawford EB.155

[5] Thomas Robins, *The Valiant Trooper and pritty Peggy: Being a pretty new Ditty, of a gallant brave Trooper, and Peggy so pritty. He oft did complain of her unconstancy, yet afterward she proved his loving Wife to be* (London: W. Thackeray, T. Passenger, and W. Whitwood, c.1674), Cambridge, Magdalen College, Pepys Ballads 4.40.

[6] Thomas Robins, *The Scornful Maid, and the Constant young-man. With mocks and taunts she doth him jear, As in this ditty you may hear; yet no denyal he would have, but still her favour he did crave: Yet at the last she granted love, and vowed She would constant prove; yet in this Ditty you may find, it is Money that doth a bargain bind* (London: P. Brooksby, c.1672), London, British Library C.22.f.6.(173.)

[7] Thomas Robins, *The Lovers Battle, Being a sore Combat fought between Mars and Venus, at a place called Cunney Castle, under Belly-hill. Bold Mars like to a warrier stout great brags did make in field but Venus she gave him the rout and forc't him for to yeild, Then Mars drew out his Rapier strong thinking to win the day. But Venus charg'd him so sore he was glad he got away. The Tune is, The Chorals delight* (London: T.P., 1664–88), Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Crawford.EB.88.

[8] Thomas Robins, T*he merry Hoastess: or, A pretty new Ditty, compos'd by an Hoastess that lives in the City: To wrong such an Hoastess it were a great pitty, by reason she caused this pretty new Ditty* (London: John Andrews, 1654–63), London, British Library, Roxburghe Ballads C.20.f.7.536-537.

The fact that three different publishers printed the song across the late seventeenth century suggests that, though it was part of a later Robin Hood tradition that has sometimes been looked down upon by twentieth-century scholars, it was popular with consumers.

Robins's second Robin Hood ballad was "Robin Hood and the Butcher," which was entered into the Stationer's Register on 15 July 1657. Just like "Robin Hood and the Beggar," "Robin Hood and the Butcher" enjoyed frequent reprints from various publishers and five copies remain extant in several libraries in Britain:

Robins, Thomas, *Robin Hood and the butcher. To the tune of, Robin Hood and the begger* (London: F. Grove, 1657), Oxford, Bodleian Library Wood 401(19)
——, (London: n. pub., n. d.), Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce Ballads 3(114a)
——, (London: n. pub., n. d.), Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce Ballads 3(115a)
——, (London: n. pub., n. d.), London, British Library, Roxburghe C.20.f.9.(259)
——, (London: I. Clarke, W. Thackeray, and T. Passinger, c.1684–86), Cambridge, Magdalen College Pepys Ballads, 2.102.

Robins's final Robin Hood ballad, titled "Robin Hood's Chase," was printed at some point between 1656 and 1662. As with Robins's other Robin Hood ballads, it was reprinted throughout the late seventeenth century and "Robin Hood's Chase" was even thought worthy of a revival by the printer L. How a hundred years later:

Thomas Robins, *Robin Hoods chase: or, A merry progresse between Robin Hood and King Henry. Shewing how Robin Hood led the King his chase, from London to London, and when he had spoken with the Queen, he returned to merry Sherwood. To the tune of, Robin Hood and the beggar* (London: F. Coles, T. Vere, W. Gilbertson, and J. Wright, 1654–62), London, British Library, Roxburghe Ballads C.161.f.1(3)
——, (London: William Thackeray, c.1688), London, British Library, Roxburghe Ballads C.22.f.6.(74)
——, (London: William Thackeray, c.1688), Cambridge, Magdalen College, Pepys Ballads 2.104
——, (London: William Thackeray, c.1688), National Library of Scotland Crawford.EB.279
——,(London: William Thackeray, c.1688), Cambridge, MA, Houghton Library 25242.67
——, (London: L. How, c.1741–62), London, British Library, Roxburghe Ballads C.20.f.9.418-419

Although no Stationer's Register entry exists for "Robin Hood's Chase," we can take the dates of between 1656 and 1662, which I gave above, to be near enough correct for two reasons. Firstly, "Robin Hood's Chase" is set to the tune of "Robin Hood and the Beggar," and "Robin Hood's Chase" must therefore have come after "Robin Hood and the Beggar," for which we have a definite publication date of 1656. Secondly, "Robin Hood's Chase" was adapted into prose by the "Ingenious Antiquary" in *The Noble Birth and Gallant Atchievements of that Remarkable Outlaw Robin Hood* (1662), giving a *terminus ante quem* of 1662.[9] Robins's songs were also included in the first edition of *Robin Hood's Garland*, which was the first anthology of Robin Hood songs, published in 1663.

Our unnamed "Ingenious antiquary" may have adapted the story of Robins's ballads into prose in *The Noble Birth*, but Robins must have been something of an antiquary himself. At the very least, he was acquainted in some way with the stories of earlier Robin Hood ballads. "Robin Hood and the Butcher" has clear echoes of the late medieval "Robin Hood and the Potter" (1468).[10]

[9] "The Noble Parentage and the Atchievements of Robin Hood," in *Early English Prose Romances*, ed. William Thoms (1828. Rept. London: Routledge, 1889), 521–46.
[10] "Robin Hood and the Potter," Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Ee.4.35, fols. 14v–19r.

In "Robin Hood and the Butcher," Robin meets a meat seller in the forests and convinces him to give him his wares that he might go sell them in Nottingham. The butcher agrees. Robin, in Nottingham, sells all the meat very cheaply, undercutting all of the other butchers. This catches the notice of the sheriff who asks Robin if he has any other meat. Robin (in disguise) informs the sheriff that there is plenty to be had in the forest and that he must accompany him there. When the pair of them reach the forest Robin points to the king's deer and asks him how he likes the meat. The sheriff suddenly realises he's been had and that the man who stands before him is none other than Robin Hood. The sheriff is robbed of the money that he brought to the forest to purchase the meat.

In the much older "Robin Hood and the Potter," Robin sells pots below market prices. He then ingratiates himself into the sheriff's household by striking up a special friendship with the sheriff's wife. The sheriff then rides with the disguised Robin to the forest where he is robbed. Robins's ballad, in a nod to its earlier iteration in "Potter," ends with Robin cheekily asking to be commended to the sheriff's wife.

THE SURVIVAL OF ROBINS'S ROBIN HOOD BALLADS

When William Webbe published *A Discourse of English Poetry* (1586) he wanted to elevate "serious" English poetry (of the likes of Edmund Spenser) from the "rustical rhymers" and their "infinite fardels of printed pamphlets, wherewith this country is pestered."[11] This was a clear swipe at ballad writers. According to Webbe's ideal, the "vulgar" would listen to (or read if they could) broadside ballads; the more refined, and aristocratic, part of the population would read high poetry. Yet for the survival of Robins's ballads we have three very high status individuals to thank: Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), Robert Harley (1661–1724), John Ker, Duke of Roxburghe (1680–1741), and Anthony a Wood (1632–95).

Pepys scarcely needs an introduction. He is the man whose diaries have illuminated scenes of London life during the Great Plague and the Great Fire of London (1666). But he loved music and was also an enthusiastic collector of street ballads. He spent his early life building up his own collection but a substantial addition came when he acquired, either through a purchase or a donation, the ballad collection of the antiquary John Selden (1584–1654), to whom Pepys gratefully gave thanks in the introduction to his own collection: "My Collection of Ballads begun by Mr Selden. Improv'd by ye addition of many Pieces elder thereto in Time; and the whole continued to the year 1700."[12]

For Pepys, the ballads that he collected represented the best of both historical and current English popular culture. They were special and this required that they all be placed in special bindings to preserve them for future generations. But when Pepys had them bound, he didn't bind them randomly. He made a clear attempt to distinguish between "ancient" ballads and poems (which we would now call "medieval") and modern ballads.

Hence there is the first text featured in volume one: a manuscript of what is now known as "The Agincourt Carol" (now separated from the overall Pepys Ballads collection and classified as Bodleian Library, MS Selden B.26, *Summary Catalogue* 3340, fols 17v–18r). What followed were published broadsides which he assumed were late printings of earlier tales. The second ballad which followed was "The Nut Brown Maid," long thought to be a medieval tale but to which recent scholarship has given a seventeenth-century origin.

The volumes progress through from the medieval period into the early modern, and Robins's ballads of "Robin Hood and the Butcher" and "Robin Hood and the Beggar" are the second volume's respective 104th and 113th ballads (see the respective shelf marks: Pepys Ballads 1.104 and Pepys Ballads 2.113). After Pepys's death,

[11] William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetry* (1586) quoted in Garrett Sullivan and Linda Woodbridge, "Popular Culture in Print," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature*, ed. Arthur Kinney (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 265.

[12] Samuel Pepys, *Pepys Ballads*, vol. 1 quoted in John C. Hirsch, "Samuel Pepys as a Collector and Student of Ballads," *Modern Language Review* 106 no. 1 (2011), 50.

his entire collection of ballads passed into the hands of the librarians at Magdalene College, Cambridge University, where one may consult them to this day.

Pepys was a politician. He served as both MP for Harwich between 1685 and 1689 and, earlier, as MP for Castle Rising, between 1673 and 1679. He was not at this period the only politician-cum-ballad collector, however, for there was also Robert Harley (1661–1724). Harley, although scarcely credited as such, was Queen Anne's "Premier Minister" or, as we would say today, "Prime Minister."

Although Robert Walpole is usually credited as being the first Prime Minister proper, Harley commanded the confidence of the queen and majority support of MPs in the House of Commons. Thus, Harley was a prime minister in all but name, a fact confirmed by the *History of Parliament Online* who state that he was

> The most important parliamentarian of his day, who moved over his political career from being a whig, with strong presbyterian associations, to being closely identified with the Tories, although Tories were always suspicious about his morals, his churchmanship and his politics. Rising to fame through his innovative use of the commission of public accounts in the 1690s, he led the Tories from the chair of the House in a highly political Speakership in 1701-5, and then held the highest offices of state between 1710-14, becoming prime minister in all but name.[13]

Harley was also an avid collector of ballads and medieval manuscripts, including many on Robin Hood. Many of the shelf marks for these items still bear his name. There is many a bibliography for a medieval history book which cites a "Harleian MS" somewhere in it. The full citation for a sixteenth-century Robin Hood text which I recently transcribed, furthermore, is as follows:

> "A Tale of Robin Hood, dialouge wise, between Watt and Jeffry. The morall is the overthrowe of the abbyes, the like being attented by the Puritane, which is the wolfe: and the Poletecian which is the ffox, agayst the bushops." *Harleian MS* 367 f.150 (emphasis added).[14]

All three of Robins's Robin Hood ballads found their way into Harley's collection. Like the trickster Robin Hood with whom we meet in Robins's outlaw ballads, Harley too, due to his highly successful scheming and turncoatism, was often given the nickname of "Robin the Trickster."

At a time when people looked to Greece and Rome as historical exemplars,[15] Harley believed that native British culture was worth preserving. His collection became the basis of the British Library when, upon his death, Harley's entire collection passed to the Duke of Roxburghe. Thus, in the citations given in an earlier section, we have British Library shelf marks such as "London, British Library, *Roxburghe Ballads* C.20.f.9.418-419" (emphasis added).

Neither Pepys nor Harley were professional historians (or "antiquaries" as they used to be called). They had some historical awareness and a general feeling that some things should be saved and rescued for posterity. But they were still very much *collectors*. The only contemporary of Robins who was a historian, and who deemed his songs worthy of preservation for posterity as historical archival pieces, was Anthony a Wood.

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[13] History of Parliament Online, "Harley, Robert, 1st Earl of Oxford (1661–1724)," accessed April 23, 2026, https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/gallery/members/robert-harley-1st-earl-oxford-1661-1724

[14] Stephen Basdeo, ed., "'A 16th-Century Tale of Robin Hood' (Harleian MS 367 f. 150)," *Reynolds's News and Miscellany*, July 3, 2025, https://reynolds-news.com/2025/07/03/dialogue-watt-jeffry-robin-hood-harleian-ms-367-basdeo/

[15] See Joseph M. Levine, "Why Neoclassicism? Politics and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25 no. 1 (2002), 75–101.

Wood's first encounter with Robin Hood songs came at the age of eight when he first wrote his name on the back of a Robin Hood broadside ballad.[16] From there, Wood's interest in the English nation's past snowballed. The study of it became the defining mission of his life. Upon his death, Wood had published two history books, with a further two remaining unpublished. More significantly, he had amassed a collection of 25 volumes of manuscripts and broadsides and 970 early printed books. Upon his death, Wood's collection was divided between Oxford's Ashmolean Museum and the Bodleian Library. In the Victorian period, the volumes that Wood had bequeathed to the Ashmolean were transferred to the Bodleian, thereby keeping the entire collection in one place.

Wood only collected one of Robins's Robin Hood ballads, "Robin Hood and the Beggar," but his entire collection of seventeenth-century Robin Hood ballads, by different authors, was the principal one used by Joseph Ritson when he was compiling *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the ancient poems, songs, and ballads* (1795). The headnote to virtually all of the later Robin Hood songs in Ritson's second volume opens with the statement "from the collection of Anthony a Wood."

Wood's collection of Robin Hood ballads, which can still be viewed in the Bodleian today, is distinguished by the shelf mark "Wood 401." Hence the reference for one of the Robins ballads above:

> Thomas Robins, *Robin Hood and the beggar. Shewing: how Robin Hood and the beggar fought, and how he changed clothes with the beggar, and how he went a begging to Nottingham and how he saved three brethren from being hang'd for stealing of deer. To the tune of, Robin Hood and the stranger* (London: Francis Grove, c.1660), Oxford, Bodleian Library **Wood 401**(23) (emphasis added).

CONCLUSION

Thomas Robins did not write his Robin Hood ballads with any expectation that scholars in the twentieth century would pore over every detail of them. Like most broadside writers of the seventeenth century, he composed his ballads to make money. The survival of his songs is not down to the greatness of his talents as a writer, however. In fact, it would be wrong to try and turn him into a "great" Robin Hood writer. And it was members of the political and intellectual elite—collectors, statesmen, and historians—who chose to rescue his pieces.

Robins's Robin Hood ballads are therefore valuable not simply as authored texts, but as evidence of how cultural value is retrospectively constructed. Their survival reminds us that what we now call "the Robin Hood tradition" is not a complete or neutral inheritance but one that is contingent upon what was selected for anthologising and placing in archives.

To study Robins is to be reminded that anonymity, loss, and uneven preservation are not accidents at the margins of popular culture, but its normal condition. His visibility as a named author today owes less to his singularity than to the fact that so few of his contemporaries were accorded the same afterlife.

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[16] Andrew Clark, *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, Antiquary of Oxford, 1632–1695, described by himself*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), 48.