“Brume, brume on ze hill...”: Two Ancient Ballads (1822) and the Persistence of Robin Hood in a Fraudulent Chapbook.

This paper will be an examination of the early nineteenth-century chapbook Two Ancient Ballads: "Robin Hood’s Courtship with Jack Cade’s Daughter” and “The Freiris Tragedie.” (Aberdeen: Published for and Sold by William Robertson [1822]). The text is something of a curiosity, in that it was a nineteenth-century creation that was meant to deceive, for it appeared to contain two authentic medieval poems, both written in Middle Scots. The chapbook was published in 1822 in a limited run of twelve or fifteen copies. (Only one copy is extant and resides in the National Library of Scotland.) It was then distributed to a small circle of ballad experts to test their knowledge of ancient ballads and to determine if these individuals could spot a literary forgery. A few experts realized that this poem was indeed a modern creation, but a small number of scholars were tricked. John Mathew Gutch was one of the latter, and he included the poem in his anthology A Lytell Geste of Robin Hode: With Other Ancient & Modern Ballads and Songs. 2 vol. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1847); subsequent scholars continued to believe that the chapbook contained two authentic medieval poems. James Maidment (1793-1879), the supposed author of the chapbook, a ballad editor, and friend of Sir Walter Scott, eventually related the full anecdote of this literary hoax in his preface to his edited collection Scottish Ballads and Songs: Historical and Traditionary. 2 vol. (Edinburgh: William Patterson, 1868); he described how and why a small group of ballad experts in Edinburgh created this ruse. Since Maidment’s revelation, the ballad has not appeared in any subsequent anthology of Robin Hood poetry, though some scholars continued to treat the Robin Hood poem as a medieval text. The chapbook was re-printed, along with Maidment’s anecdote, in 1888.

This presentation will focus on the literary contexts of the chapbook and will concentrate, primarily, on the first item in it, Robin Hood’s Courtship with Jack Cade’s Daughter. First, and most importantly, I will argue that the poem should be included in the Robin Hood corpus of poetry, one that has a number of Scottish literary influences. The poet was working within the Robin Hood tradition, he was aware of the literary motifs associated with the outlaw’s ballads, and he executed the poem in a fairly sophisticated manner. Indeed, this poem has an aesthetic quality that surpasses many of the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Robin Hood ballads and broadsides, those that are firmly within the corpus. Second, I will argue that Robin Hood’s protean and mutable nature allows for the inclusion of a variety of texts within his own tradition. Since Robin’s first literary appearance in the B-text of William Langland’s Piers Plowman (ca. 1377-79) up through and including Ridley Scott’s 2010 film Robin Hood, we have witnessed an ever-changing figure who has found himself in a variety of genres and media. It seems only fitting then that it is the figure of Robin Hood who is at the center of a literary hoax. And last, I will discuss how this poem, published in 1822, is perfectly situated within the rebirth of Robin Hood literature in the early nineteenth century, which began in 1818, with John Keats’ “Robin Hood: To a Friend,” Sir Walter Scott’s dictating of Ivanhoe, and Thomas Love Peacock writing Maid Marian.

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