

William Kemp, Shakespeare's Star Comedian, Morris Dancers, and Robin Hood: Emblematic Images of the Body

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William Kemp, the acrobatic Morris dancer and Shakespearean comic star, and the historical and emblematic figure of Robin Hood and his legend—along with the methods of communication they represented—had symbolic significance in early modern popular culture. Kemp and the figure of Robin Hood share many characteristic features: their expressive dancing and fighting, the gestural, spontaneous genres of contemporary entertainment they purposefully chose, the oral, popular culture they represented and their unique physical appearance. We can glean information about the above-mentioned communicational forms from the following invaluable visual sources: the Tollet window, the front page of Kemp's diary, *Nine Daies Wonder*, and several illustrations of the ballads of Robin Hood. We can also find the mainstream of the Robin Hood tradition that Kemp also represented: comedy, parody, transgression, and farce. These genres are intimate and dynamic parts of the medieval ballads and popular films as well.¹ In my essay I aim to highlight *the* Robin Hood whom Kemp might have embodied in his performances.

Popular Culture

Popular culture preserved by custom and oral tradition still retained considerable power in Elizabethan times; it included the festive seasonal rituals associated with the holidays: jigs, dancing, songs,² clowning, old romances, proverbs, and ballads which existed both as speech or song and as printed texts (Gillespie and Rhodes 1). It is impossible to imagine a clear divide between oral and written cultures in the early modern period.³ The oral dimension of Elizabethan popular culture was essential⁴ as the sixteenth century was a time when the majority of people were unable to read (Fox 3). These forms of popular culture were very much part of the social fabric of which Kemp and his contemporaries were part.

1 I have given lectures on the topic of Robin Hood and his appearance in films: the survival of the comic tradition in popular culture in 2013 and 2014 at different iconological, Shakespeare- and history conferences in Hungary.

2 For an overview of Elizabethan jigs see Baskervill.

3 For further discussion of early modern literacy see Spufford and Darnton.

4 Fox's work is concerned with orality and literacy and with the relations between speech, sound and text.

The locations at which Kemp worked—the foreign courts, the streets and festivals, the playhouse, and the tavern—were commercial ventures and the entertainment Kemp and his fellow comedians provided is a good example of this commercial way of thinking (Fox 2). Symbolic clothing, appearance, the concept of the grotesque body and satirical dance—all of which reflect the Elizabethan popular culture which shaped Kemp's own sense of identity—dominated his art.

According to Peter Burke everybody was a participant in popular culture, although it is true that it was the only culture that existed for the majority of the people, while the privileged minority had access to a second, elite culture based on literacy, traditions and institutions as well. He also writes about the “amphibious” nature of these people—the humanist-educated males—who, in spite of their elite culture, grew up listening to old wives' tales. He emphasized that popular culture was shared both by the upper classes and the common folk until around the sixteenth century. The elite classes supposedly retreated from popular culture during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Burke 7-9).

Communicational Forms

Fools who were the well-known representatives of early modern popular culture appeared in different colours and in various costumes. Their appearance carried a definite message; it had symbolic significance in their culture (Klaniczay 51-77). They used different modes of communication within popular culture.⁵ They communicated with their bodies, faces, hairstyle, clothes, and the colours, the patterns and accessories they wore (Bakhtin 105).

In order to reveal the functions of the symbols and the various aspects of the appearance of different kinds of fools in Kemp's art and personality, I have made an inventory of the clothing of dancers, court jesters, actors and natural fools. We do not know much about Kemp's clothes, except for the illustration of *Nine Daies Wonder* where he is noticeably wearing a costume typical of the Morris dancers. With his long full beard and long hair, which was endemic among actors and often criticized by Puritans (Prynne),⁶ he wanted to emphasize that he belonged to the Morris dancers and the popular tradition that included the hero and the heroine of the legend: Robin Hood and Maid Marian. He also wore a bright and colourful costume with a number of bells sewn onto it and the special Morris coat.

Another invaluable resource is the Betley window, featuring contemporary Morris dancers on its panes.⁷ Although this inventory does not follow a line of narrative—it is rather a patchwork of images—the subsisting pictures and paintings of Kemp's contemporary comic fellows and dancers, and the different medieval and early modern

5 For further discussion of the playful elements of the fool's communication, see Huizinga.

6 Prynne was a vociferous opponent of long hair.

7 The Betley or Tollet window and the characters can be seen in the V&A Museum. Images of the window, upon which the analysis in this section is based, are readily available for viewing in the public domain on the Internet.

festive occasions for which he played various roles, are revealing of the traditional appearance of fools. The above-mentioned illustrations, the use of colours, the green Kendal material and the accessories worn in the medieval and early modern times are parts of a jigsaw puzzle illustrating how the fools presented themselves in the contemporary spheres.

The Tollet Window

For Elizabethans, dance meant a mixture of costume, song, dialogue and movement, and these factors characterized Morris dancing as well. It became widespread and fashionable in three different venues in England in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries: on the stage, in the streets and at court (Forrest 71). The Betley or Tollet window is illustrated with Morris dancers. The window was probably made between 1550 and 1621.⁸ The small, diamond-shaped panels of stained glass are an invaluable source for my research: they show, in authentic colour, the articles of clothing which the Morris dancers in Kemp's age wore. Several scholars, including Francis Douce sometime Keeper of Manuscripts in the British Museum, have examined and analyzed the window. According to Douce the Tollet window probably exhibits the oldest representation of an English May game and Morris dance (8). There are twelve figures altogether surrounding the maypole pictured on the window. The figures, all of them dancers, are arranged around the tall, decorated maypole. George Tollet, the eighteenth-century owner of the window, believed that the figures in the images represented various layers of society.

John Forrest thinks that the special coats are as old as the Morris in England, and David Wiles assumes that the appearance of Morris coats goes back to the beginnings of the Robin Hood legend in the Middle Ages (Forrest 11-12). It is probable that Robin Hood and his group of Morris dancers the Merry Men wore the Morris coat and bells, and that their coat was made of green Kendal. Kemp's vine-patterned Morris coat may have contained the colour green as well. The fools' and dancers' most typical colours were green, yellow, and other bright colours as Philip Stubbes explains (121).

Bells had become a fashion item in the twelfth century, first among the aristocracy, and then among lower social classes as well, but from the fourteenth century onward this fashion started to look and sound vulgar. Fools and Morris dancers continued to wear them, and by the middle of the fifteenth century, bells became associated with foolery (Korhonen 181). Bells on legs and arms, often indicative of the Morris dancer, are common costume elements in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries for dancers who are definitely not performing Morris. Fools wore the bells scattered all over their bodies and costumes; the most typical place was the hood with its long ears and the pointed collar. Like Morris dancers, fools could tie bells on their legs, and many wore them on their sleeves as well. A parallel between fools and domestic animals can be seen here: dogs and monkeys were also often decked with bells.

The first figure on the window is a witty fool-jester judging from the smart expression

8 The *Tollet window* is in the possession of Lord Bridgeman, now in Minsterley, Shropshire.

on his face and his pretty brightly coloured costume often worn by the artificial fools. He has a bauble in his hand, topped perhaps with an animal head; the fool's bauble and the carved head with the ears are also yellow. Like most of the other figures, he wears bright and strong colours: red, dark blue and lemon-yellow. There are also bells on his ankles and on his elbows. His costume shows strong animal symbolism.

The second figure is a dancer in a yellow Morris coat with the special long sleeves. The third figure has special sleeves as well. According to Tollett and Bridgeman he is a Spaniard or Fleming (2). He has long, straight fair hair and wears a red and dark blue bonnet. He has dark red streamers which may be a version of Morris sleeves, a tight red jacket, and a white stomacher with red lace. His hand gestures indicate energetic dancing movements. The next pane depicts a maypole which is painted yellow and black in spiral lines (Stubbes 36). The erection of a maypole was always a prelude to Morris dancing. David Wiles, in his examination of the roots of the Robin Hood legend and the early plays of Robin Hood, described and collected sources concerning Robin Hood's clothes as well (Wiles, *Early Plays of Robin Hood* 12). Robin Hood's men were often depicted as Morris dancers, especially during the May games. Wiles assumes that the maypole played a significant role in the Robin Hood game (12). Some of Wiles's most important sources are the accounts from Kingston.⁹ The accounts from 1520 confirm that the Morris men were a separate group, marked out by their uniforms. They wore coats of spangled fustian and bells on their garters (Stubbes 37). Stubbes's pole, "sometime" painted, is "covered all over with flowers and herbs," and green boughs are bound onto it after it has been erected (37). The maypole was an emblem of summer and of the natural world and also a phallic symbol indicating fertility.

The next figure is Tom, the piper, the musician or minstrel,¹⁰ and then comes the hobby horse ridden by a knight, both of whom are depicted in festive attire. The man with a golden crown, purple cap and red feather is the King of May. He has long, fair hair and holds a sword in his mouth. The following figure may represent Robin Hood, the wooer of Maid Marian who often played the role of the Summer King. Tollett calls him "Parish clerk or Hocus-Pocus, juggler-attendant upon the master of the hobby-horse" (2). Robin Hood during the May Games also collected money and was presented as a skilful juggler and dancer. The dancer has long, wavy golden hair with a reddish pink flower on his forehead, which is identical to the flower in Maid Marian's hand. The shared flower motif may highlight their close relationship; their face and hair are also similar. Robin Hood has a dark jacket, a red-and yellow-striped stomacher, a long tight white hose with what may be tiny decorations or a scrip or pouch, in which he might, as treasurer of a company, keep the collected money. He is wearing bells under his knees and on his wrists.

The tenth figure is an innocent or a natural fool with a foolish expression on his face. He has long, straight, brown hair and is wearing a brown hood with a white headdress, a dark blue jacket, a yellow stomacher and white hose with dirty, dark spots

9 The contemporary and medieval references and documents were gathered in Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*. There were annual ritual activities, plays and games all over England, from Exeter, to Aberdeen, from Norfolk to Wiltshire, from Kingston to Melton and Reading.

10 Tollett in his *Notes* calls him Tom, the piper.

on it which indicates his ignorant behaviour; he has bells on his ankles. The eleventh figure, representing Maid Marian or the May Queen, is clearly a very feminine and central character. Several male dancers compete for her favour here as they did in the ring dance and in Elizabethan jigs, and the gift for the man of her choice is the flower in her hand. She has long, untidy, wavy fair hair and a dark purple coif with a golden crown. She is wearing a long, dark blue surcoat; the cuffs are white and the skirts of her robe are yellow. She is holding pink flowers in her hand. Tollett comments that Maid Marian's coif and hairstyle are similar to that of Henry VII's elder daughter, Margaret, at her wedding with James, King of Scotland (5).

The twelfth figure is Friar Tuck, chaplain to Robin Hood, the King of May. He appears in a long habit of light brown and dirty white. He has a tonsured head and is holding a chaplet of white and red beads in his right hand. His downcast eyes express humility. His corded girdle and his russet habit indicate that he may belong to the Franciscan order. His stockings are red; his girdle is decorated with a twisted pattern and a tassel, both in gold. The friar's posture indicates that he is also dancing, as he often appeared in the Robin Hood plays during church ales and in Morris dances. On this window Friar Tuck appears as a humble monk; he lowers his eyes and wears pastel colours.

The subdued colouring of the natural fool and of Friar Tuck is an exception from the generally bright colours of the dancers' garments. In their case bright colours are not dominant; only red and golden appear, russet and off-white colours being more prevalent in their apparel. The evolution of Friar Tuck's character is similar to that of Maid Marian in its complexity. By the end of the Elizabethan period, the convention was well established that Friar Tuck was a jolly friar: both a lecher and a dancer (Munday, *The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntington*).

The arrangement of the figures suggests that all the dancers are equally important in the performance. Each of them is represented separately; they are not paired or grouped together. Kemp could epitomize every character but in my opinion the most probable ones are the King of May, Robin Hood on the hobby horse, Maid Marian's wooer and the artificial Fool. The appearance of the figures on the Tollett window also proves that generally the most typical feature of the fool's and the Morris dancers' clothing seems to have been its eccentricity and bright colours. The fool's clothes were often sewn into outrageous shapes or colour schemes (Korhonen 137). They were arranged on the fool's body with a jumble of colours axially and symmetrically and each trouser leg could be of a different colour (Hotson 91).

The Transformation of the Figure of Robin Hood

May Games or Robin Hood Games were the most important festivals from the point of view of Kemp's character and career (Matthews 393-411). During his journey Kemp as Morris dancer represented the traditional roles in contemporary popular culture: Robin Hood, the Lord of Misrule in the Tudor May Games, the Tudor Lord of the May or Summer Lord and the traditional Fool figure as well. Through an analysis of Kemp's diary, I have found that Kemp's association with Robin Hood came to the fore over the course of his career.

The Robin Hood legend has long been studied by historians, by literary critics and folklorists. Historians before the 1960s were preoccupied with the search for the original Robin Hood. In the 1970s, however, the legend was seen as a historical phenomenon in its own right. Two historians, Richard Berry Dobson, and John Taylor, with their impressive documentation and analysis of the legend published in 1976 under the title *The Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw*, have provided the groundwork for a whole line of research. David Wiles's work, recorded in his *Early Plays of Robin Hood* in 1981, was also based on their research, as was Stephen Knight's anthology on the scholarship and criticism of Robin Hood published in 1999. I have also drawn primarily on this scholarship.¹¹ The existing references before 1600 have been collected by Stephen Knight in his book: *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*. According to his research, a remarkable number of plays and games of Robin Hood were performed in Britain: in Exeter (1426-1427), Aberdeen (1438), Norfolk (1441), Wiltshire (1432), Kingston (1520) and in Melton (1556).

Ballads

The earliest reference to the “rhymes of Robin Hood” comes from Langland from 1377, and the earliest manuscript of a ballad is dated c. 1450.¹² The origins of the Robin Hood game are intangible (Wiles *Early Plays of Robin Hood* 43). Chambers cites instances of the King game and the construction of the Maypole from the 1240s (Chambers 176). The role of the Summer King, the priest of the fertility spirit was played by a version of Robin Hood (Wiles, “Robin Hood as Summer Lord” 80). Over the course of the period spanning the beginning of the sixteenth century and the end of the seventeenth, Robin Hood became the central figure in the May Day Games to the extent that the celebrations came to be known as “Robin Hood’s Games.”

From the early sixteenth century on, single-sheet printed broadsides were sold in the market-places, and Robin Hood remained popular primarily because of these broadside ballads and anecdotes about him, which were a significant part of the oral culture of the time (Fox 372).¹³ Many inns were named after Robin Hood as he was the “patron saint” of English archery (Clark 151). The medieval predecessor of Robin Hood was a mature, heroic and tragical figure (Child II. 240).¹⁴ In spite of this, it is the particular characteristic feature of the broadside ballads that Robin Hood does not appear in them as a hero; the courtly and romantic elements are either completely suppressed or subjected to crude burlesque. Kemp also belonged to this tradition, which

11 The Robin Hood project at the University of Rochester also provided useful resources and bibliography. For further discussions of this matter see www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/.../rhaumenu.htm

12 1. *Robin Hood and the Monk* (1450) 2. *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* 3. *Robin Hood and the Potter* 4. *The Gest* (1510). *The Gest* was written for Henry VIII.

13 See Spufford 51-72 and Knight and Ohlgren 1-3 for more on this topic.

14 Courtly elements play distinctive part in *The Gest of Robin Hood*, an important ballad which was first printed in about 1510. It was a unique exception in popular oral tradition as it was designed for the literate reader rather than the common listener. The tone is more elevated and the poet celebrates a chivalric value system: although Robin remains a yeoman, his chivalry is Arthurian (see Knight 81).

appears in popular films in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. None of the earliest surviving Robin Hood broadside ballads is exactly dated, but a very large number of those preserved in the great collections of Anthony Wood, Samuel Pepys and John Ker, 3rd Duke of Roxburghe were printed by Francis Coles and his London rivals during the middle years of the seventeenth century (Child III.43).

The May Day celebrations helped to keep the Robin Hood cult alive (Dobson and Taylor 155-60). It is remarkable how often Robin Hood appears in the records in close association with a Lord of the May or Summer King; in Wiles's view Robin Hood is probably a variant of the May King or Summer Lord (Wiles, "Robin Hood as Summer Lord" 78-99). In the May Games Robin Hood participated in the already well-established Morris dances, which was a world very different from that of the late medieval ballads (Matthews 395-97). The presence of Robin Hood and his archers, the display of archery and also other feats of arms commonly associated with the tales of Robin Hood possibly provided the "warlike" elements of the May Games (Fox 372). In the second half of the sixteenth century it was vitally important for a comedian to be physically fit and skilful and to be good at fighting when participating in May Games, processions and theatrical plays, all of which included the Morris dance. Kemp was "head-Master of Morrice dauncers and ventured a long distance Morris" (Kemp 52). His master, Tarlton was Master of the Fence at court.

Robin Hood serves as an emblem of spring; dressed in green, Robin and his company personify spring vegetation.¹⁵ Because of its particular association with new life, the game became the particular property of youth. There were several conflicts in the relationship between the young men and the parish authorities because the Robin Hood Game often became the festival of the young men of the parish; it gave unmarried men the chance to assert their group identity (Wiles, *Early Plays of Robin Hood* 56-58). In the context of parish life, the household was perceived as the dominant economic unit, so those who lacked power were the young males because they could only marry when they had finished their apprenticeship or service and had acquired the means to set up an independent household (Davis 98-123).

Plays

Robin Hood appeared in the mummers' plays, in the medieval tale or ballad, and subsequently entered the world of the play (Knight and Ohlgren 5.) In the sixteenth century the legend of Robin Hood can be found in the plays of Anthony Munday, Ben Jonson and Thomas Deloney.¹⁶ Shakespeare's many allusions to the ballads prove that he was familiar with the legend and the symbol of the English greenwood (see, for example, *As You Like It*), and he also appears in Jonson's play, *The Forrest* (1616).

15 Only in the popular ballad of "Robin and the Potter" is there a hint of sexuality, through Robin's liaison with the Sheriff's wife. Elsewhere in the early ballads, emphasis is placed on Robin's devotion to the Virgin Mary.

16 Robin Hood was also immortalized in Deloney's works about Jack of Newbury and Thomas Reading.

Munday was the most influential of the playwrights to write about Robin Hood; in his plays he treated the outlaw hero's career at length. Munday was the first to make Robin Hood socially respectable; he laid the foundations for an aristocratic strain in the myth of Robin Hood. He completed the process to make Robin Hood fitting for the court, and identified Robin Hood with the dispossessed Earl of Huntingdon in 1598 (Munday, *The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntington*). In 1615 he also introduced Robin Hood in his *Metropolis Coronata, the Triumphs of Ancient Drapery*, a pageant prepared for the London Lord Mayor's Day (Munday, *Metropolis Coronata, the Triumphs of Ancient Drapery*). Thanks to Munday, the English greenwood became fashionable not only in the sixteenth-, but in the first forty years of the seventeenth century. However the popular tradition often describes Robin as a yeoman, and, even in the seventeenth century, ignores his new social status created by Munday's version of the legend (Dobson and Taylor 160-65). The little information which is known about the origins of royal interest in Robin Hood can be found in the chronicler Edward Hall's well-known account of the court festivities of the young King Henry VIII (Hall). Robin Hood mainly appeared in spectacles and pageantry and only very rarely in surviving Tudor literary texts.

In spite of their name, the May Games were not exclusively associated with May Day or even with the month of May. From parish accounts it can be known that Pentecost—which continually linked the “revels” of Robin Hood with Whitsuntide, a holiday that frequently falls in June—marked the moment when May Games began (Wiles, *Early Plays of Robin Hood* 3). Between May Day and Midsummer various games and sports, dances, pageants and plays were held (see Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses* 36). According to Wiles's research there are different terms for the “revels” or “sport” of Robin Hood: a game, an ale, pageants, the dance, and “gaderyngs” or gatherings. The most general and most often used word is “game” (Wiles, *Early Plays of Robin Hood* 3). Church ales were also associated with the May Games; they were organized at the local parish or municipal level (Whitfield 67-89). Falstaff (who was certainly played by Kemp) also embodied youth as the King of Carnival, as he indignantly says in *1Henry IV* “they hate us youth.” (Humphreys *1Henry IV* 2.2.81-82).¹⁷ “What, ye knaves! young men must live” (*1Henry IV* 2.2.81-82).

Elements of love and sexuality can be found in the May Games as well. Excursions into the greenwood “to bring in May” were an old custom in England. Stubbes describes that people went out into the woods before dawn and gathered flowers and branches which were to deck both pole and bower (*Anatomie of Abuses* 36). This tradition was rebuked by Puritans as an excuse for promiscuity. Stubbes in his account of bringing home the maypole also throws suspicion on the maids: “I haue heard it credibly reported (and that, *viua voce*) by men of great grautie and reputation, that of fortie, threescore, or a hundred maides going to the wood ouer night, there haue scaresly the third part of them returned home againe undefiled” (36r; Forrest, *History Dancing* 129).

There is no documentary evidence to support their suspicions. The election of a May Lady to serve alongside the Lord acted as a control, and enforced the enactment of

17 All Shakespearean references are to the *Arden editions* of the plays.

courteous, chaste behaviour. Robin continued to inhabit the springtime of life; he was described as insatiably belligerent, but never lecherous.¹⁸

Summer King

The Summer King and Robin Hood, who represented the fertility of nature, provide the clearest link between Kemp and the medieval past and popular entertainment (Stallybrass 280-84). By Tudor times the main object of the May Games became the collection of money for the parish. In most of the instances the church provided costumes and paid the hire of musicians; the profits from the game were then paid back into church funds (Matthews 285-88). During the May Games, the Summer Lord, who was also the lord of the Morris dance, distributed paper livery badges in return for a levy which was paid into church funds (Wiles, *Early Plays* 26).

In his entrepreneurial version of the game, Kemp, at the beginning of his journey, distributed his own identifying keepsakes to those who supported him, and he also accepted challenges from common people (Kemp 4). The aim of handing out badges was to gain profit. The Summer Lord was followed by about twenty to a hundred men (Wiles, *Early Plays* 11). Robin Hood and his troop rode from village to village; their play was accompanied by music performed by a minstrel and two drummers. Stubbes also describes their costumes, which were of green, yellow or some other light colour. They also wore ribbons, lace, jewels, and dancing bells.

When we examine Stubbes's description of the characteristic features and functions of the Lord of Misrule in the Tudor May Games, we can find that they also belong to impersonators of the greenwood outlaw (Hill 285-88). The May Games celebrated man's proximity to the natural world; the Summer Lord was an embodiment of the idea that human folly was common to both the greatest and the humblest of mortals. Many elements are amalgamated in the figure of Robin Hood: the Summer Lord who is a fool, the green man, the incarnation of spring and the outlaw who ignores the requirements of society (Wiles, *Early Plays* 19). Eric Hobsbawm, in his classic study *Bandits*, takes him as the archetype of the social bandit who becomes a focus of resistance to an oppressive authority (7-19, 92-93). This complex figure was *the* Robin Hood whom Kemp might have embodied in his performances.

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¹⁸ It was Friar Tuck, not Robin Hood, who represented the lewd, fertile male. For an overview of this matter, see Wiles, *Early Plays of Robin Hood* 24-25.

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