Speaking Through Folktales:
Or,
Robin Hood’s Contribution to English Broadside Ballads

"Come you Gallants all, to you I do call
With a hey down down a down,
That now within this place,
For a Song I will sing of Henry the King,
How he did bold Robin Hood chase."

(Introduction:
In the early modern era, English broadside ballads were widely distributed prints that would have been sung out to convey narratives of news, social lessons, and politics relevant to a contemporary English, early modern audience. At UC Santa Barbara, the English Broadside Ballad Archive (EBBA) works to provide public access to such ballads through the creation of a digital archive, which includes digitally preserved copies, transcriptions, and recordings of these 17th century English ballads. These resources are created by the EBBA team and eventually posted on the EBBA website for all to see.

Contribution:
During my time as an EBBA research assistant I have had the opportunity to work with Houghton Collection ballads, creating transcriptions and ballad facsimiles that allow today’s audience to read these ballads with greater ease and comprehension. I also have worked to categorize and catalogue ballads through thematic keywords.

Discussion:
In many of the ballads I have worked with, one of the recurring figures I found to be interesting was the English folk-figure Robin Hood. Still widely known today, folklore depicts Robin Hood as a heroic outlaw, and highly skilled archer, who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. It makes sense then that many of the English broadside ballads that revolve around Robin Hood deal with topics such as crime, class, violence, and trickery/deceit. In the ballad "Robin Hood’s Chase" (EBBA 35347) we see Robin Hood defeat King Henry in an archery competition. This causes an angry King Henry to pursue a chase of Robin Hood on the grounds of treachery. Robin Hood, with all his wit, outsmarts the King and his men, thus escaping until the Queen declares him pardoned, and the chase discontinued.

But why include such folktales in broadside ballads? Robin Hood was a heroic figure of and for the people. Thus, his stories gave the people a voice to critique the monarchy and upper class society. As seen in "Robin Hood’s Chase," we are presented with the idea that a king is not perfect, as he can be out-skilled in archery, and out-witted. Such critique and representation would have been highly condemned if said outright during the time. Therefore, in broadside ballads, we see the use of folktales and the inclusion of figures such as Robin Hood be used as a tool to circumvent the censorship of unfavorable public outcry.

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