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'goon in-to Bernysdale': The Trail of the Paston Robin Hood Play

John Marshall

Line for line, the mutilated single folio manuscript of an early Robin Hood play carries more weight in the interpretation of medieval English theatre history than possibly any other text of its time. (See Plates 5 and 6 for a reproduction of the manuscript, and Appendix 1 of this essay for a transcription.) The twenty-one couplets of action inferring dialogue represent the chief source of information, from the fifteenth century, for the Robin Hood plays that are thought to have been a feature of some May games in which Robin officiated as a parish money-gatherer and presided, as a type of summer lord, over seasonal celebrations. As such, the text has become central to the study of non-religious medieval drama in England, and to the history of the Robin Hood myth in performance.¹ Conscious of this critical reputation, this essay nevertheless seeks to reconsider the evidence for associating the play with the Paston family, re-examine what the manuscript can contribute to an understanding of the play and its circumstances of performance, and, finally, to question the cultural and political interests that may have been served by its patronage.

The evidence for connecting the Pastons with the play is entirely circumstantial, and involves the descent of the manuscript on the one hand, and the unkindness of servants on the other. To begin with retrospection. In 1908 W. Aldis Wright presented the manuscript to the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, where it was catalogued as MS R.2.64.² He had been given it by the widow of Philip Frere. Frere's father, William, Master of Downing College, Cambridge, was the nephew by marriage of Sir John Fenn, the first editor of the Paston letters. Fenn acquired his material for the volumes from John Worth, a chemist of Diss in Norfolk, who had purchased it from the estate of the antiquary Thomas Martin, executor of Peter le Neve, Norroy, and husband of his widow.³ This collection le Neve had bought in the early eighteenth century from William Paston, earl of Yarmouth. It is quite possible that MS R.2.64 was included in these papers as, at some time during the third decade

Handwritten text in a medieval script, likely Gothic, on a parchment page. The text is arranged in approximately 18 lines. A large, decorative initial 'D' is visible at the beginning of the first line. The script is dense and characteristic of the 12th or 13th century. The page shows signs of age, with some darkening and wear, particularly on the right side.

Plate 5: Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.2.64; recto
(Published by permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge)

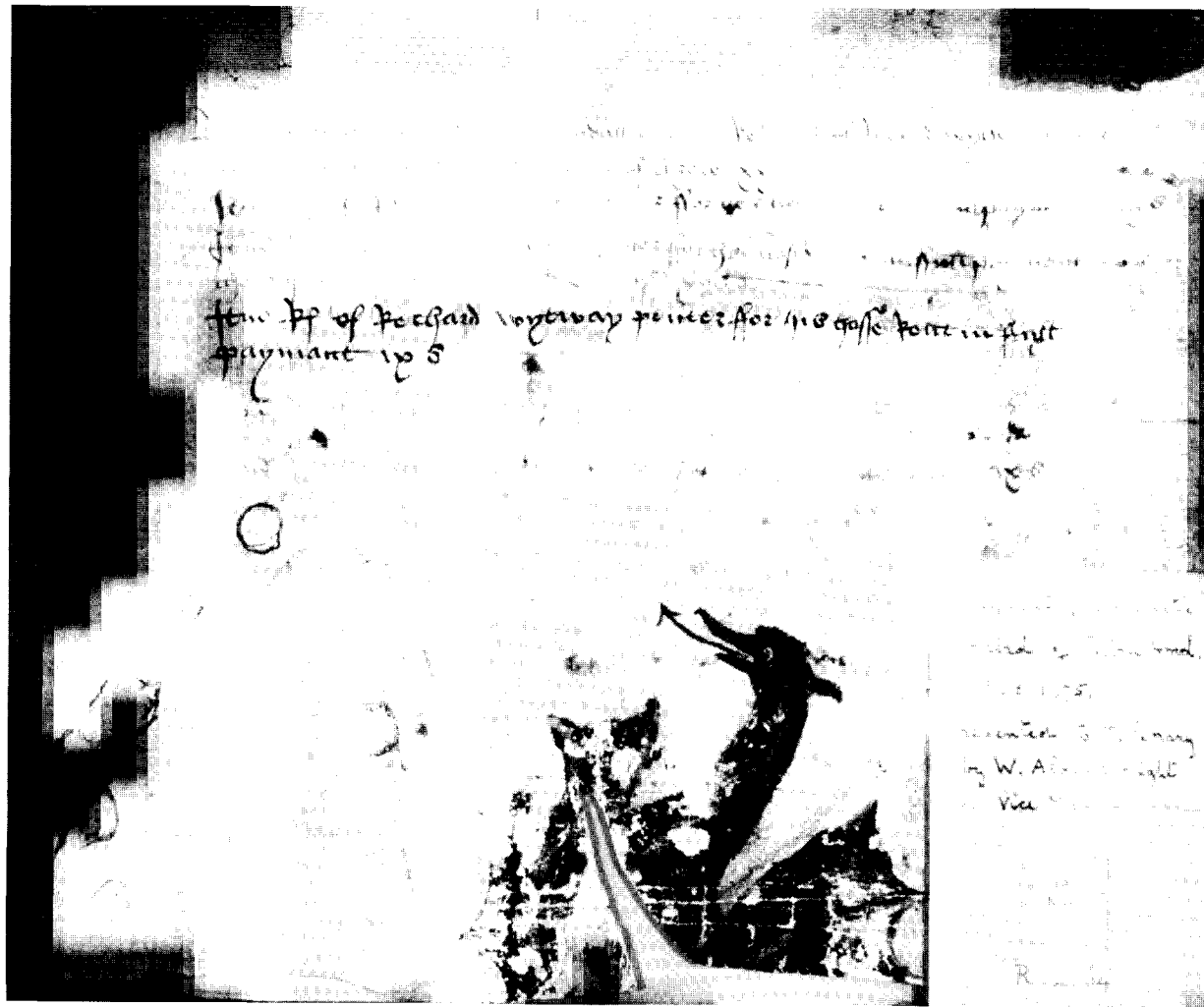


Plate 6: Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.2.64; verso
(Reproduced by permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge)

of the eighteenth century, the antiquary William Stukeley made a copy of the Robin Hood text while it was still in the possession of Peter le Neve. Stukeley's transcript of the manuscript, which he claimed had been 'taken from the inside of some old book', passed to his great-grandson, Richard Fleming St John, along with other antiquarian material, which he, in turn, brought to the attention of 'J.M.G.' of Worcester, who printed it for the first time in 1855.⁴ Unfortunately, Peter le Neve's ownership of the manuscript is not proof that it came from the Pastons, for, as is well known, he also possessed material from other sources, notably one of the manuscripts of the Howard household books, that he had been given by Thomas Martin in 1727, that is now in the library of Arundel Castle.⁵

Somewhat paradoxically, it is the breaking up of the collection of Paston papers, following Fenn's publication of them, that, possibly, strengthens a family connection with the Robin Hood manuscript. Fenn, who seems to have purchased only Paston material from John Worth,⁶ deposited the originals of his first two volumes in the library of the Society of Antiquities. Shortly after, he responded to an intimation that George III had an inclination to see them with an offer to place them in the Royal Collection. This was accepted, and Fenn knighted on 23 May 1787. The manuscripts were not seen again publicly until 1889, when they turned up at Orwell Park in Suffolk. The original material of volumes three and four also disappeared after publication in 1789, only to re-emerge nearly a century later in the possession of George Frere, the then head of the Frere family, at Roydon Hall near Diss. Fenn died in 1794 having almost completed the fifth volume of letters which his nephew, William Frere, finally saw through publication in 1823. In that volume, Frere, by now somewhat predictably, noted that he was unable to find the originals, although he did have some original material that he thought Sir John Fenn did not intend for publication. The letters were rediscovered in 1865 by Philip Frere in the house at Dungate in Cambridgeshire that had belonged to his father. Along with the mainly fifteenth-century manuscripts of the fifth volume were found the other Paston papers, including letters from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that had not been published by Fenn. Frere sold this collection to the British Museum a year later. One item he clearly did not include in the sale, that may well have been part of the unprinted material, was the Robin Hood manuscript that his widow was to pass on to Aldis Wright. Was this because he could see no obvious connection between the manuscript and the Pastons? Certainly, there is no internal evidence for such a relationship. It was not until 1888 that Francis Child made the suggestion that the play referred to by Sir John Paston in a letter of 1473 as, 'Robynhod *and* the shryff off Notyngham', and that recorded in the manuscript were one and the same.⁷ The clear

descent of MS R.2.64 to Philip Frere via Fenn's purchase of it amongst Paston material, that had once belonged to Peter le Neve, suggests that Child may well have been correct in putting the two together. Frere, on the other hand, was, in 1866 at least, either unaware of its likely provenance or considered it insignificant to the documentary history of the Pastons.

In spite of the manuscript's persistent attachment to a collection of Paston papers, that passed through six hands over a century and a half, the crucial issue of its origin rests with Peter le Neve and whether he acquired it from William Paston. It may be significant that the remarks of William Stukeley on the manuscript, reproduced by 'J.M.G.', make no reference to the Pastons nor, it has to be said, to any other context for it than an inaccurate transcription of the third item of the account on the verso. To be fair, he may not have known of the other papers in the le Neve collection. His primary concern seems to have been with the literature and pedigree of Robin Hood, and, moreover, interest in the Pastons had yet to be aroused by Fenn's publication of the letters.

The history of the manuscript alone is not sufficiently certain to attribute original ownership to the Pastons, although it is supported, as Child noted, by the Paston correspondence. Even though extracts from the letter concerned are often reproduced, it is worth quoting in some detail here as it is also referred to when considering the possible circumstances of performance. On Tuesday, 16 April 1473 (Good Friday) Sir John Paston was at Canterbury, preparing to leave for Calais. He wrote to his younger brother John, in Norfolk, about a peace treaty between France, England, and the duke of Burgundy that had been agreed in Brussels the previous month, before lamenting the disloyalty of his servants;

No more, but I haue ben *and* ame troblyd wyth myn ouere large *and* curteys delyng wyth my seruantys *and* now wyth ther onkyndnesse. Plattynge, yowre man, wolde thys daye byd me farewell to to-morow at Douer, not wythstondyng Thryston, yowre other man, is from me *and* John Myryell *and* W. Woode, whyche promysed yow *and* Dawbeney, God haue hys sowle, at Castre þat iff ye wolde take hym in to be ageyn wyth me þat than he wold neuer goo fro me; *and* ther-vppon I haue keyyd hym thys iij yere to pleye Seynt Jorge *and* Robynhod *and* the shryff off Notyngham, *and* now when I wolde haue good horse he is goon in-to Bernysdale, *and* I wyth-owt a kepere.⁸

Two aspects of this letter help to corroborate the association of MS R.2.64 with the play referred to by Sir John Paston. First, it is the only known reference to a play or game of Robin Hood in an East Anglian context in the late Middle Ages. While it is conceivable that, in Norfolk and Suffolk, they were embraced by the generic term 'game', and thus become invisible in the records, the survival of the Robin Hood play in manuscript may be a possible indication of its unique character in the locality. And second, Paston's eponymous title includes the Sheriff of Nottingham, with whom an audience would, no doubt, identify the 'sheryffe' who makes an early appearance in the play text. This too was unusual for the period. In other regions the sheriff does not seem to figure in the plays or games until very much later – the earliest being post-Reformation – and even then his appearances are comparatively rare.⁹ Unless this is an instance of absence from the records, rather than exclusion from the game, it could be explained by the predominant patronage of Robin Hood gatherings by the parish, where the anonymity of the perpetrators of injustice and corruption may have been more expedient than the identification of the Crown's deputy as the source of indignation. Alternatively, it may be because, whatever some recent critics would like to read into the Robin Hood games, the gatherings were essentially parochial fund-raising activities that celebrated communal identity and fraternity, rather than the symbolic enactment of social and political conflict that attendance by the sheriff might have encouraged.¹⁰ The inclusion of the sheriff in both the Paston play title and the Robin Hood manuscript, at a time when his presence in such activities is otherwise, literally, unheard of, makes stronger the case for linking the two, and for challenging the assumption that the play is archetypal of the genre.

The very act of recording a text that appears, superficially at least, to be little more than an *aide-mémoire* to a sequence of actions raises questions about its status and original purpose. The condition and the uses made of the manuscript imply that, whatever they may once have been, sight or need of them was very soon lost. MS R.2.64 is a single paper sheet, now held between two pieces of glass, that measures, approximately, 251mm x 209mm (9^{7/8} by 8^{1/4} inches).¹¹ At the bottom of the sheet is a series of cuts that have removed the lower section and, in two places on the recto, mutilated the last four lines of the Robin Hood text. Much of its appearance suggests that the text is a copy rather than the original composition. It is written, in brown ink, by a single hand of the mid-fifteenth century without errors or emendations. Although possibly a copy, it was not necessarily one designed for preservation, as no speech headings or stage directions are included, and the handwriting becomes progressively larger and less tidy. Furthermore, the scribe, or someone else, drew, in ink of a similar colour to the handwriting, a broken vertical line about half way across

the page after the last word of the opening line of text. As some subsequent words appear to have been written over this line, it is possible that it was drawn, after writing the first couplet, as a scribal guide, either to see if the text could be kept within an area that would approximate to the dimensions of some literary manuscripts of the time or, if necessary, to continue the text into the right hand division of the sheet.¹² Whatever the intention, it was, apparently, compromised by the lengths of all but one of the remaining lines. This could suggest that the copy was made from dictation, rather than from sight where the problems of tabulation might already have been evident.

The verso of the manuscript is largely taken up with a series of six receipts, recording payments made to John Sterndalle by Richard Wytway, painter, for the house rent of a property described as the 'wardorrop'.¹³ (See Plate 6 and Appendix 1). From the date recorded for the third receipt, 'the vij day of november Ao Ed iiiijth xv' (i.e. 1475), it is possible to calculate that the entries extend from May 1475 to August 1476, and that, if made in arrears, the payments cover the period from August 1474 to August 1476. Correlation of the sums paid, and changes between entries in the colour of ink and the size of letters, indicate that the payments were recorded, after the first instalment, at quarterly intervals. They were entered throughout by a single hand. Although very similar, this is probably not, as Davis thought, the same hand as the recto.¹⁴ There is sufficient variation in letter forms – the verso consistently uses a much more looped upper stroke for *f* than the more angular recto for example – to agree with Greg that the hands are different but contemporary.¹⁵

Beneath the receipts is a painting of a green wyvern or dragon. The lower body, feet, and tail have been lost by the cuts to the manuscript. This damage makes it difficult to determine, precisely, what it represents. It could be a copy of an armorial crest or badge. The absence of the torse and helm, that may originally have been present in the missing part of the manuscript, limits the case for a crest, although its upper figuration is not unlike some examples of the early Tudor period.¹⁶ If its origin was heraldic, the blazon would read; a wyvern with wings expanded vert, tongue barbed gules; to this should probably be added, belly and wing tips or, but these areas are so cracked by folding and darkened by age as to be beyond verification. More simply, it may be a preliminary drawing for an inn sign or some interior decoration. An appealing alternative, given the possible East Anglian connection, is that the painting either depicts, or is a design for, the dragon that was part of the Norwich, Guild of St George procession. Sir John Paston had Wood play 'Seynt Jorge' about the time the character seems to have been reintroduced to the procession, following an absence of fifteen years after the restructuring of the gild in 1452.¹⁷ In 1471 the gild

assembly found it necessary to ordain that, 'the George shall goo [in] procession and make a conflicte with the dragon', implying that this had not been the case in recent years.¹⁸ There is some similarity, particularly in the long neck, jaws, ears, and wing tips, as well as in colour, between the manuscript painting and the surviving Norwich dragon of c. 1795, preserved in the Castle Museum. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing whether Sir John Paston is referring to the Norwich, St George procession in his letter, or if the fifteenth-century dragon resembled that of three centuries later. Sir John Paston is likely to have belonged to the gild, as other members of his family did, although there is no evidence of his active participation.¹⁹

To the left of the wyvern or dragon are much cruder sketches of a woman's head, wearing what appears to be a gable-coif with shoulder length pleats of the early sixteenth century,²⁰ and an implement of indeterminate purpose that may be anatomic or pyrotechnic in origin. Notwithstanding the attractiveness of subject matter and draughtsmanship coinciding in their crudity, or the logic of the five thin protrusions representing the outstretched fingers of a hand or glove, I am inclined to think that the drawing is of a siege gun in the act of firing. The discharged missile is seen above the woman's head and, following the conventions of much more sophisticated depictions, the explosive charge is shown by lines emanating from the muzzle, and the unused ammunition by the circles beneath the barrel.

It would appear, then, that there is no immediately obvious connection between the recto and the verso of the manuscript, or between the account and the Pastons. Neither the name Sterndalle nor Wytway appears in the Paston correspondence or related papers. Indeed, it has proved impossible to trace either name beyond the documentation of the rental. Nevertheless, one piece of information John Sterndalle considered worthy of recording may intimate a historical association between the performance of the play and the property rented.

The identification of the tenement occupied by Wytway as the 'wardorrop' is intriguing. Unlikely to refer to the royal household establishments of that name, it could be one of the London buildings acquired by the nobility after 1300 to store clothes, soft furnishings, and other luxury items. Although primarily storehouses, it was not unknown for them to be used, by their owners, as occasional lodgings.²¹ Down in scale, spatially and socially, from the detached wardrobes of royalty and nobility were those integral to the houses of the upper gentry. Under normal circumstances, none of these seems likely to have been leased to a painter for two years, unless superfluity of space and financial necessity combined to provide the incentive. In essence, these were the conditions prevailing at Caister Castle at the time of Wytway's tenancy.

When the building of Caister Castle (about a half a mile north-west of West Caister, Norfolk) began in 1432, Sir John Fastolf can hardly have imagined that it would become the site of such violent disputation a generation later. The contesting of Fastolf's written and nuncupative wills, and the right of the Pastons to inherit Caister Castle, is of such complexity that it has recently received a book-length study of its own.²² What needs to be extracted from the internecine wrangling between executors and claimants, for the purposes of this discussion, is the alternating possession of Caister.

Probate of Fastolf's will was granted to Sir John Paston and Thomas Howes (Fastolf's chaplain and one of the ten executors of his will) on 26 August 1467.²³ At this point the trustees released Caister and other Fastolf manors to Sir John Paston, thereby, temporarily, legalizing the current occupancy of Caister by the Paston family. There was barely time for any Paston satisfaction in this resolution. On 1 October 1468, William Yelverton, justice, and other trustees of Fastolf's will, including Thomas Howes who had now deserted the Paston cause, sold Caister to John Mowbray, fourth duke of Norfolk, for 500 marks.²⁴ From this moment on, Sir John Paston took steps to protect Caister from an anticipated forced entry by the duke of Norfolk in pursuit of his claim by sale.²⁵ The siege began on 21 August 1469 and ended with surrender by John Paston, Sir John's younger sibling, who commanded the defending forces in his brother's absence, on 27 September 1469.²⁶ The Pastons regained Caister following the redeption of Henry VI and the duke of Norfolk's decision, in December 1470, to remove his servants from Caister and publicly to declare his renunciation of a claim to the manor on the grounds of misinformation.²⁷ Again, Paston possession of Caister was short-lived. Both brothers fought on the losing Lancastrian side at the battle of Barnet (14 April 1471). In the wake of Edward IV's restoration, Caister was retaken on 23 June 1471 for the duke of Norfolk by his groom, John Colby, while the Paston servants took an afternoon nap.²⁸ Norfolk held Caister until it was restored to the Pastons in the summer of 1476 by command of the king, following the death of the duke earlier that year.²⁹

This to-ing and fro-ing of possession, whilst deeply disturbing for the Pastons, is of particular interest in respect of the transactions between John Sterndale and Richard Wytway because Caister Castle accommodated a wardrobe of some considerable size. Although its precise location in the castle is unknown, it was sufficiently large, according to a testamentary inventory made prior to Sir John Fastolf's death in 1459, to house over 270 items of clothing, fabric, pillows, bed-covering, cloths of Arras and tapestry.³⁰ Three years later, the contents had, apparently, been reduced to eighty-four rather mundane items, mainly of bedding.³¹ The clothes,

stocks of quality material, and all but two of the magnificent collection of illustrated tapestries, had gone. The fate of what remained there, and of the Paston's own possessions, is unclear. The duke of Norfolk, in his declaration of safe conduct to the Paston affinity, conditional on the surrender of Caister, allowed for the removal of 'goodes, horsse and harneys, and other goodes beyng in the keping of the seid John Paston', providing that the weapons remained.³² The younger John Paston may have doubted either the sincerity of the duke's pronouncement or the ability of fatigued men to carry the goods away as he took the precaution of making an inventory, now lost, before departing from Caister.³³ His suspicion or caution was apparently justified. Sir John Paston, in his petition to the king, recalls that the duke of Norfolk not only deprived him of possession but also took and carried away, 'stuf and ordinaunces' to the value of £100.³⁴ Paston had been informed of the situation by his servant, John Pampyng, who wrote on 15 July 1470 to tell him that, 'at Caster, they selle *and* make mony of such stuffe as they fond there'.³⁵ Forewarned, the Pastons made an inventory of the 'goodes *and* stuffe of howsold' that had been 'born and led away', during Norfolk's occupation, soon after they regained possession in 1470.³⁶ Only one of the items listed, though, is specifically from the wardrobe, which implies that what little was left there of Fastolf's goods either failed to impress the Norfolks or had been removed by the Pastons at the duke's invitation at the time of surrender. The latter is, perhaps, confirmed by the report of John Paston to his elder brother of the perennial complaint of mothers about the state of their son's bedroom; 'Item, she [their mother, Margaret] wold ye shold get yow an other house to ley in youyr stuff syche as cam fro Caster; she thynkyth on of the freerys is a fayir house'.³⁷

Whatever glories the wardrobe at Caister may formally have held, it was possibly empty by 1472 when John Paston wrote to his brother of their mother's concern. The Paston and Fastolf contents were by now elsewhere, and in spite of the duke of Norfolk's fierce determination to own Caister, he does not seem to have installed his family there. In January 1470, during Norfolk's first occupation, the younger John Paston informs his brother that, 'ther is now but iij men in it, *and* the bryggys alwey drawyn'.³⁸ And throughout the negotiations for the restoration of the manor to the Pastons, with the duchess and Norfolk's council, they almost always happened at Framlingham. For the duke, it seems that possession of Caister was primarily a matter of expanding his sphere of influence in the area, and of acquiring much needed revenue from the associated manorial tenancies at a time when he 'was in a state of chronic, constantly worsening, indebtedness'.³⁹

It is not impossible that the renting out of the Caister 'wardorrop' for thirty-six shillings a year was a welcome contribution to the relief of these debts. The rental

expired in August 1476 during the quarter in which the Paston claim to Caister was finally resolved. Although this happened at the end of June, there is no indication of when the Pastons physically resumed occupation.⁴⁰ Unhelpfully, only one Paston letter from the second half of the year survives. The date is 30 August but the year uncertain, although internal evidence suits 1476, and it places Sir John and his brother, temporarily, in Attleborough.⁴¹ It is, then, conceivable that Wytway's tenancy was terminated in August by the return of the Pastons.

It is probably fruitless to speculate on why Wytway may have been at Caister between 1474 and 1476, beyond noting the spatial suitability of a wardrobe to the professional needs of a painter. Given the tenancy arrangement, it is, perhaps, unlikely that he was employed directly by the duke of Norfolk. If the wyvern is an example of his craft, he may, though, have been undertaking some heraldic duty on behalf of the duke in his capacity as Earl Marshal. Interestingly, Sir John Paston, at some time after 1475, listed four books of arms amongst his library holdings, one of which was, 'the nywe boke portrayed *and* blasonyd'.⁴² Might Wytway have had a hand in it?

Even if this speculation has some grains of truth, it does not explain how a sequence of receipts came to be written on the back of the Robin Hood play, or, of course, *vice versa*. For a possible answer it is necessary to return to the letter in which Sir John Paston, with characteristic restraint, catalogues the desertion of his servants. In it he glosses the departure of 'W. Woode' with some valuable information about his employment.⁴³ He may have been prompted to do so by the imminence of St George's day (a week away) in whose celebration Wood had previously taken part. In addition to whatever skill Wood possessed as a groom, his ability to 'pleye Seynt Jorge *and* Robynhod *and* the shryff off Notyngnam' clearly contributed to his attractiveness as an employee. Sir John, somewhat unnecessarily one would think, reminds his brother that he had 'kepyd hym thys iij yere' for this very purpose.

Sir John's reckoning needs some clarification. It is not clear from which year he is counting. When he wrote the letter, the traditional seasons for playing St George and Robin Hood had not arrived. This implies that Wood's final performances occurred in 1472. Working back in years, rather than figures, would give a first performance in 1470. And yet Sir John also reminds his brother that Wood had been hired, and swore Paston fealty, in the presence of John Daubeney, a family servant. Daubeney was killed at the siege of Caister in September 1469.⁴⁴ Confirmation, from another source, that Wood was at Caister that year, by August at the latest, comes in the *Itineraries* of William Worcester. There he is listed amongst the names of the defenders of the castle, against the duke of Norfolk, in a group of three 'seruientes Paston jun'.⁴⁵ The apparent confusion over which Paston was the master arose, presumably, because, as

the letter rehearses, the younger John Paston employed Wood on behalf of his absent brother. If Wood was taken on in the summer, he would have missed the season of St George celebration, but not necessarily that of Robin Hood. If so, Sir John's calculation that he had 'kepyd hym thys iij yere to pleye Seynt Jorge' turns out not to contradict the time of Wood's appointment. He first played St George in 1470. He may, though, have been employed early enough in the year to play 'Robynhod *and* the shryff off Notyngham' on four occasions, beginning in 1469. In the predicament of losing nearly all his Calais destined servants, Sir John's trifling oversight, if indeed it was, is excusable.

Regardless of the timing of Wood's first performances, it is unlikely that he was employed for this purpose alone. His main occupation seems to have been that of horse-keeper. He was also, no doubt, a competent archer; not only because of his involvement with Robin Hood but because Sir John Paston sought to replace him, and the others, with 'lykly men *and* fayre condycioned *and* good archerys'.⁴⁶ For this particular skill he was, almost certainly, hired, or more accurately re-hired given the qualification 'ageyn wyth me' in reference to him in the letter, in response to the fears of Sir John Paston for the safety of Caister. These he expressed in a letter to his brother in November 1468. He wrote that he had engaged 'iiij wel assuryd *and* trew men' to help keep the place, and that if local men were to be taken on in addition that they be 'but few, *and* that they were well assured men; fore ellys they myght discourage alle the remenant'.⁴⁷ Maybe at the time, and in the light of previous service, Wood was considered one 'well assured'.

As the above demonstrates, there is no way of being sure where or when Sir John Paston had Wood play Robin Hood. If he followed his heart and tradition, it would have been Caister in the summer. Wood was there in 1469, but was Sir John? His brother evidently hoped to see him there that year 'a-bowght Mydsomer or befor'.⁴⁸ In early June, Sir John went some way to fulfilling this expectation by making tentative arrangements, from London, to stay at Caister if he accompanied Edward IV on his visit to Norfolk.⁴⁹ For whatever reason he did not go; his brother reports on the king's visit to him in reply, as well as reflecting, with hope now turning to fear, that, 'your men at Caster wyll deperte . . . *and* ye be not at hom wyth-in thys fortnyght'.⁵⁰ This may have galvanized Sir John into action. He either made the visit or his brother was exaggerating; the men remained at Caister until their expulsion by Norfolk in September. Whether or not *Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham* was performed at Caister in 1469, it certainly did not take place there the following year when Norfolk held the manor. It could, though, have been there in 1471, possibly at Whitsun, before the surprise repossession by Norfolk's groom on 23 June. There is a

gap in the correspondence to and from Sir John Paston in that year between the letter of 18 April 1471, that he wrote to his mother, from London, after the battle of Barnet, and the letter to his brother, written at Bishop's Waltham on 15 September 1471.⁵¹ He was quite possibly at Caister for some of that time. In either 1469 or 1471, Sir John Paston may have brought or had copied there the manuscript of the Robin Hood play, preparatory to performance. In neither year, though, was its preservation likely to have been uppermost in the minds of men forcibly expelled from the castle. Unlike any valuable property that could have been removed, the sheet of paper, in all probability, was left behind. And it may have been left where household documents and accounts were sometimes stored, in the wardrobe.⁵² There it may have remained during Norfolk's possession of Caister until Richard Wytway's tenancy. The manuscript, by then, was redundant, and the blank verso could be used for the painting of the wyvern and for recording the receipt of rent. With Caister restored to the Pastons, the tenancy agreement ended, and the receipts were no longer required. The manuscript, witnessing yet another change in Caister's fortunes, may have again been left in the wardrobe, to be reunited with the Paston papers.

This is only one of a number of scenarios possible to explain the history of the manuscript. One could, using some of the same evidence, argue that Sir John Paston, responding to his mother's request in 1472 that he remove the stuff that came from Caister to another house, acquired a property for the purpose in Norwich. Rather than take up her suggestion of 'on of the freerys', he may have found a more suitable storehouse in a wardrobe. No building of that name is known in Norwich at the time, although a subsequent change of use may have determined a change in title.⁵³ If the Caister contents had been dispersed by 1474, Sir John may have sub-let the property to Richard Wytway through the agency of John Sterndalle. The same relationship, described above, between the unwanted copy of the play and the receipts would then apply. In these circumstances, the connection between the painting in the manuscript and the Norwich Guild of St George annual procession with the dragon may be strengthened. The problem with either possibility is that the internal evidence is slight, and unless John Sterndalle or Richard Wytway can be identified, inconclusive. Nevertheless, the narrative outlined for the period in which the manuscript was active is, at least, consistent with the turbulent events and the enforced movements of the Paston family in the years between 1469 and 1476.

Not surprisingly, the play has, in the past, received rather more attention than its provenance, but this too involves a deal of speculation. The text is a series of interchanges between characters, all but one of whom are addressed by name or title, that contextualize physical action. Although there is no indication in the manuscript,

the piece divides into two episodes. The first describes a sequence of contests between the Knight and Robin Hood that end with the Knight's death. The second concerns the capture and imprisonment, by the Sheriff, of two outlaws, presumably Robin's men. As Child was the first to observe, this does not appear to be an original creation, but a dramatic version of the ballad, *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*.⁵⁴

Although precise dating of the ballad, first printed by Thomas Percy from a seventeenth-century manuscript in 1765, is not possible, the resemblance of the opening verse to that of *Robin Hood and the Monk*, which has been dated by handwriting and vocabulary to the second half of the fifteenth century, suggests that it may be contemporary with the Robin Hood play.⁵⁵ Moreover, the play and the ballad have in common not only major protagonists and dramatic incidents but also a significant number of words or their variants. In spite of its comparative brevity, the play is not merely a crude adaptation of the ballad. It forgoes the foreshadowing device of Robin's dream, in which he meets and is beaten and bound by two yeomen, in favour of the more sharply dramatic bargain between the Sheriff and the Knight that is only implicit in the ballad. It ignores the characterizing quarrel, that temporarily separates Robin Hood and Little John, in order not to delay the contests between Robin and the Knight. This decision has the additional advantage of removing the problem of the simultaneous action of Little John's capture in the ballad by deferring it until Robin has killed the Knight. Having done so, it becomes necessary to deviate from the ballad by introducing Friar Tuck as a companion for an unnamed outlaw, almost certainly Little John. Both are captured by the Sheriff whilst distracted by the Friar's boastful demonstration of his skill at archery. This is the first instance of Friar Tuck in the Robin Hood literature, and it is possible that his inclusion may have been inspired by his involvement in the May games, although this is not recorded until the early sixteenth century.⁵⁶ The play text ends with the imprisonment of the outlaws, in contrast to the ballad that concludes with the death of the Sheriff from an arrow shot by Little John who had been released by Robin Hood disguised as Sir Guy.

The discrepancy in endings has been explained by alternative theories. The simplest assumes that the play manuscript is fragmentary, with the ballad ending cut away.⁵⁷ The most contrived proposes a complete text by redistributing the conventional attribution of final speeches to enable Robin to lock the Sheriff inside his own prison.⁵⁸ A position between the two is taken by the view that the verbal text is intact, and that the performance concludes with heroic action alone.⁵⁹ Yet another explanation, or rather a refinement of the third, can be found in a close examination of the manuscript. Given the probable Paston connection with the play, it is possible that it was written on paper also used for their letters. According to Davis, the full

sheets from which letters of varying sizes were cut measured 'about 17 by 11^{1/2} inches' (432mm x 292mm).⁶⁰ The usual practice was to write the first letter across the shorter side, with wire lines running vertically, and cut it from the sheet when completed. The remaining rectangle would either be used in the same way or, as some letters reveal, turned through 90 degrees, with the writing now parallel to the horizontal wire lines. This is the orientation of MS R.2.64, and if it took up the remainder of a full sheet, the letter cut from it would have measured about 11^{1/2} by 7^{1/8} inches (292mm x 181mm); a size not uncommon in the Paston correspondence. As no water mark is apparent in the manuscript it was, presumably, located in the part of the sheet used for the letter. This means that the width of MS R.2.64 has remained constant at 9^{7/8} inches (251mm), whereas, on these calculations, the length originally extended to 11^{1/2} inches (292mm). As it is now, on average, only 8^{1/4} inches (209mm), the cuts that removed the bottom of the manuscript must have been made, approximately, 3^{1/4} inches (83mm) from the lower edge. These dimensions are confirmed, to some extent, by two previously unobserved folds in the manuscript.⁶¹ The uppermost creases the paper horizontally in towards the verso and occurs on a slight downward, left to right, slope that crosses from above to below line 10 of the play. The second fold, also horizontal, bends the manuscript, concertina fashion, the other way (i.e. in towards the recto) and bisects lines 20 and 21. As the lower fold is very close to what is now the edge of the manuscript, it is reasonable to assume that the folding took place before the mutilation. Refolding the manuscript, if the glass permitted, would show that, providing the lower pleat was roughly the same size as the other two, allowing for an even folding with the bottom of the missing segment meeting the crease of the upper fold, the strip would have measured about 3^{1/4} inches (83mm). This would give a restored manuscript the same length (11^{1/2} inches, 292mm) as one of the sides of an original Paston sheet.

As well as adding to the evidence of a Paston connection with the play, this reconstruction of the manuscript indicates that if the scribe used all the space available he could have written another seven lines; more than enough, given the economy of dialogue, to cover Robin's reappearance, the release of the outlaws, and the shooting of the Sheriff. But there is also evidence, in the manuscript, that he wrote no more than what survives.

The cuts across the bottom of the manuscript, although irregular, seem to try to avoid destroying the text, unlike the loss of parts of words caused by the two diagonal intrusions. It appears from the bisection of the wyvern, and the preservation of the last line of the play, that the cuts were made with the recto uppermost. The initial cut looks to have been made from the right hand edge. It moves left on a gentle

curve for about 60mm ($2\frac{3}{8}$ inches) until it stops abruptly and changes direction. The reason for this would seem to be that continuation of its trajectory would have cut into the final word 'gon' of the last line. The cuts then weave their way to the left hand edge, turning away from the text whenever it is threatened. Such care from someone apparently so unskilled with scissors or knife might indicate that the text was deliberately preserved, and always finished where it does now. This is supported by Greg's observation that 'no traces of the tall letters of the next line are visible'.⁶²

All this points to the improbability of the play being fragmentary as a consequence of the mutilation to the manuscript. It is either verbally complete and resolves in action or was never completed by the copyist. If dialogue was intended to provide a final exchange between the Sheriff and Robin it is unlikely to have extended beyond a line or two, and it is difficult to see why the scribe would not have seen the task through. Moreover, there is no information additional dialogue could provide that the audience did not already possess. They knew of the agreement between the Knight and the Sheriff, and they had seen Robin disguise himself. If the play concludes with the outcome of the ballad, there is no need to reinforce its enactment with spoken commentary. From this, and other information, it is possible to provide a conjectural reconstruction of the play with speeches attributed to characters. This appears in Appendix 2, with variations from other published versions noted.

The undeniable resemblance between *Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham* and *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* has tended to obscure some revealing differences. Whilst the ballad may have been the inspiration for the plot of the play it was not, necessarily, the source of all the action. The play places much greater emphasis on the physical contests between Robin and the Knight than does the ballad. Whereas the latter confines the combatants to the military arts of archery and sword fighting, the play extends the competition by inserting the sports of casting the stone and axle-tree, and wrestling. Non-dramatic Robin Hood games may be thought to have inspired their inclusion if it was not for the problems of time and place. As previously noted, no other examples of Robin Hood games are known in East Anglia, and, if the play can be dated to Wood's engagement in 1469, this is only the second recorded instance of Robin Hood in performance anywhere in the country.⁶³ If the derivation of the extra contests was not directly from the Robin Hood game it was, probably, not very far removed.

In the early fifteenth century, depositions were taken to resolve a dispute over grazing and extraction rights to land called the Lyngs between the inhabitants of Litcham, in north-west Norfolk, and those of neighbouring villages. The first witness recorded in the deposition roll is 'Sire Thomas Bolewere', who is described as, 'lyvende

and dwellyng in Bodenaye'.⁶⁴ This dates his statement prior to 1421 when Thomas Bulwer ceased to be rector of St Mary, Bodney, and translated to Narborough.⁶⁵ He follows testimony on the pasturing of cattle with a more revealing recollection;

Also þe forn seyð Thomas witnesseth þat he hath sen vpon þo lynges diuerse pleyes made be þo men of lucham þat is to seyne Schetynges wrestelynges puttynges of þo ston where he saugh Ion payn *and* howe of easton butten for þo prys gamen *and* Ion payn wan þo prys gamen þere vpon þo lynges sette *and* made be þo men of lucham withowten lettyng of ani man.

All that is required to transform an event like this into the first episode of the Robin Hood play, apart from the pre-determined outcome, is a few lines of speech and, perhaps, some costumes. Coincidentally, Litcham is only four miles north-east of Sporle Wood where the Pastons held property. But, no doubt, they could have been exposed to this variety of summer sport almost anywhere in East Anglia. In 1528 and 1533 the churchwardens' accounts of Great Witchingham, Norfolk, for example, record the receipt of payments for 'the increse off the Wrestelyng *and* Shoting'.⁶⁶ It is not improbable that many of the unspecified games in the area were also of the Litcham kind.

This local evidence and the emphasis in the play on Robin's prowess as an athlete suggests that these games may have been as influential in the creation of *Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham* as the ballad that provided the literary framework. This raises the question of what initiative, if any, lay behind the combining of sport and art in this way. The concept of grafting a narrative on to displays of physical combat is not unknown at the time but is, almost exclusively, a device of the tournament. The medieval practice of employing an allegorical fiction to explain the presence of knights in the *pas d'armes* would, no doubt, have been familiar to Sir John Paston. His interest in the combative and aesthetic aspects of the tournament is attested by his collection of chivalric and romance literature.⁶⁷ One of the contents of his *Grete Boke*, that describes numerous jousts and tourneys, deals specifically with the fictional background to a Burgundian *pas d'armes*.⁶⁸ His pleasure in the subject was not confined to its literature. In the spring of 1467, Sir John Paston wrote to his brother, with conspicuous delight, undiminished by an injured hand, about his participation, on the side of the king, in a tournament at Eltham.⁶⁹ The following year, both brothers attended the marriage of Charles, duke of Burgundy and Margaret of York, at Damme near Bruges. A spectacular feature of the

celebrations, that so impressed the younger John Paston that he wrote to his mother likening them to the court of King Arthur, was the eight days of jousting followed by a day of tournament held in Bruges.⁷⁰ Known as the *Pas d'armes de l'Arbre d'Or*, the fictional content was based on part of the *Roman de Florimont*, in which a golden tree is defended by a knight in the service of the Dame de l'Isle Celée.⁷¹ Not unexpectedly, Sir John Paston had the challenge of Antoine, Bastard of Burgundy, acting as the Chevalier à l'Arbre d'Or, copied into his *Grete Boke*.⁷²

Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham was possibly written a year after the tournament at Bruges. The proximity of the two events may be no more than coincidence, although, interestingly, both have a tree as a central scenic location and include a character blowing a horn. And, if the play culminates in any kind of affray between Robin and his men and the Sheriff, both adhere to the format of single combats preceding a *mêlée*. More telling, though, is the sharing of the conventions of staging, impersonation, and narrative to contextualise combat. It is possible that the chivalric experiences of Sir John Paston encouraged him to create a rural equivalent of the *pas d'armes* for the entertainment of his household and tenants. To do so, he simply fused two popular traditions; the summer game and the Robin Hood myth. This would not be uncharacteristic of the man. As well as his erudition and love of courtly pastime, he indulged in crude verse, and took juvenile pleasure in such things as 'litell Torke', the performing dwarf, whose 'pyntell is asse longe as hys legge'.⁷³ His tastes were catholic, and he is as likely to have been familiar with the culture of his servants as his masters.

What emerges from this cultural intermixing is the intriguing possibility that Sir John Paston may have had a hand in the composition of the play. The manuscript is not in his handwriting, but this was not unusual in his impersonal papers.⁷⁴ The text employs some spellings he used in his letters and others that he did not.⁷⁵ Whoever was responsible for the authorship of the play, rather than its copying, seems, like Sir John Paston, to have had some knowledge of jousting. When, in the appended reconstruction of the play, the Knight challenges Robin to a fight to the death, he uses the word 'outrance'. The word does not appear in *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, or the other medieval ballads. In the sense that it is used by the Knight, it is mainly to be found in the context of chivalry, where its meaning, as in joust à *outrance*, focuses on the war-like conditions of combat rather than the final outcome.⁷⁶ Both senses fit the engagement between the Knight and Robin. It is a word that Sir John Paston would, almost certainly, have known and recognized as a technically appropriate term to register the escalation to armed conflict in the play. He may also have been aware that the object of combats à *outrance* was to win something worn by

the challenger.⁷⁷ Robin's disguise in the Knight's clothes is a motif taken from the ballad, and essential to the plot, but its tournament connotation is unlikely to have escaped Sir John's notice, and may have further influenced his choice of terminology.

There is no evidence that he had a copy of *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, unless 'the Greene Knyght' contained in his 'blak boke' denotes a ballad collection rather than, as has been conjectured, a copy of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.⁷⁸ Even if he did not own a copy, he knew the ballad well enough to quote amusingly from it in the letter that bemoans the departure of his servants. Interpretations of Sir John's report that Wood had 'goon in-to Bernysdale' conclude that this was either a 'jesting way of saying that he had paid Woode for wasting his time', or an ironic indication that Wood participated in dramatic activity without his blessing.⁷⁹ Both are more inventive than is necessary. In the ballad, Robin and Little John quarrel over who is to confront the 'wight yeoman' who leans against a tree. Robin, angered by what he sees as Little John's challenge to his authority and courage, is only restrained from inflicting a blow to his head by the fear of damaging his bow. They part acrimoniously;

But often words they breeden ball
That parted Robin and John;
John is gone to Barn[e]sdale,
The gates he knowes eche one.⁸⁰

There is no way of telling how accurately the seventeenth-century manuscript of the Percy Folio preserved the wording of the medieval ballad. Nevertheless, the closeness of the third line of the stanza to Sir John Paston's sardonic gloss on a similarly bitter parting is surely intentional and, moreover, typical of the man.

Whether or not the hand of Sir John Paston can be detected in the play, his patronage of it seems well founded. What doubts have been expressed cite the obstacles of his military career and mobile life to the continuity of annual drama.⁸¹ This need not have posed a problem. As already shown, performances could have taken place as a feature of Whitsun celebrations at Caister in 1469 and 1471. In 1470, Sir John Paston spent at least part of the summer in London, but not necessarily with his servants as he did in 1472. In July that year, the younger John Paston sent greetings, in a letter to his brother, to 'W. Wood, and all'.⁸² In October, he wondered whether any of them had been sent to Calais as, 'me thynkys it costlyth yow to myche money for to kepe hem all in London at *your* charge'.⁸³ This was, almost certainly, the group of servants he listed, in full, for greeting by name in a previous letter that year.⁸⁴ It

turned out to include all those who left the Paston service in 1473. A performance in London in 1472 is by no means impossible. The play was clearly portable, and required no more than the five players that could be met by the number of servants, including Wood, Paston had with him. Reading between the lines of a letter he sent to his brother on 3 June 1473, he may even have anticipated a performance further afield; 'I hopyd to have been mery at Caleys thys Whytsontyd, *and* am weell apparayled *and* apoyntyd saff that thes folkys fayle me soo; *and* I have mater there to make off ryght excellent'.⁸⁵ A performance in 1470, if one did take place, might also have been in London, providing his servants were present. Alternatively, it may have occurred, as indeed it might in other years, at one of Margaret Paston's properties, possibly Norwich or Fritton, without him. A year or two before, his mother was evidently taking care of 'syche folk' of her son's, at her own expense, while he was elsewhere.⁸⁶ Perhaps conscious of the debt, but confirming the arrangement, he assured his brother, in 1473, that if he had Caister again, and his mother chose to live there, he would pay for the board, 'iff any horsekeeper off myn lye ther'.⁸⁷ Sites of performance were always more likely to be determined by the location of his servants than the whereabouts of Sir John.

Wherever the performances took place, it is not certain that they were confined to the years of Wood's employment between 1469 and 1473. Sir John Paston infers the timescale in his letter, but only because his purpose was to illustrate the extent of his loss and Wood's ingratitude. Even a performance life so limited by vicissitude does not prejudice the unique position of the play in the history of Robin Hood drama. It is, as far as records show, the only example of such a play in household patronage.⁸⁸ The great majority of Robin Hood games, with or without plays, were organised by the parish. Shrewsbury was an exception in being under civic sponsorship.⁸⁹ In Scotland, too, the burgh generally took control.⁹⁰ The tenants of Cleeve Prior, 'pleying' with Robin Hood and Maid Marian before Prior William More of Worcester in 1531, may have been acting under manorial auspices, and the watchful eye of their lord, but the relationship is not directly comparable with the Paston situation.⁹¹

It is, of course, possible that the level of Sir John's patronage has been overestimated here, and that he did no more than provide a servant for a local play as part of his duty as a gentleman. But the lack of Robin Hood games in the area, the earliness of the play in the history of the genre, and the depth of feeling aroused by the loss of Wood as a performer, all tend to favour a personal initiative. In the absence of evidence that there was an existing model for Sir John Paston to imitate, he may have been responsible, if not for inventing the Robin Hood play, for creating an independent version.

His experience of drama was not limited to Robin Hood. He, presumably, knew the Norwich Corpus Christi play well enough to appreciate the characterization of a political adversary as Herod.⁹² And he either sponsored or contributed Wood for a play or procession of St George, in Norwich or elsewhere. He may not have possessed the inspiration for an original creation, but his breadth of interest and his skill as a lively correspondent may be regarded as sufficient qualification to synthesize the three pre-existing cultural forms of game, ballad, and tournament. His credentials for authorship are, perhaps, as visible as his motives were transparent. Although Sir John Paston may not have wholly identified with the yeoman status of Robin Hood in the ballads, the 'extending of his umbrella of solidarity over distressed knightly victims of oppression' would have appealed to the sense of injustice he felt from the moment he became head of the family.⁹³ The problems inherited with Fastolf's will, the threats and attacks on property, the delays and frustrations of law, and the increasing impoverishment that was their consequence, almost crushed the spirit of the family.⁹⁴ In a world in which corruption and the deficiencies of law prevented justice, it is no wonder that Sir John Paston turned, symbolically at least, to Robin Hood for restitution. It is tempting, but perhaps too whimsical, to imagine Sir John seeing Robin as his *alter ego*. He seems to identify with him in his choice of quotation to describe Wood's departure. His father had been outlawed.⁹⁵ And members of his family would sometimes envisage those whom they admired or despised as characters from drama and romance.⁹⁶ This kind of imaginative play may seem incompatible with the seriousness of his circumstances. But at times, he must have seen parallels between his role as prosecutor of the Paston cause and Robin's as personifier of justice in the face of corrupt administration. It is true that there is little of this side of Robin in the play. This is because it concentrates on the spectacle of remedy. The nature of the complaint is a matter of audience choice. With this degree of openness, it is possible that Sir John Paston recognized that, in the play of Robin Hood, he could assimilate the political and cultural interests of his servants with his own. The quest for justice and the desire for freedom – the 'double image' of appeal to the gentry and to the yeomanry observed by Dobson and Taylor⁹⁷ – may have ostensibly united the household at a time when consensus, or at least commitment to a common cause, was crucial to survival. It turned out to be 'double edged'. After 'thys iij yere', Wood, perhaps unnerved by the prospect of Calais, was no longer prepared to enact his freedom, he took it. Justice for the Pastons took a little longer.

APPENDIX 1

Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.2.64

Recto

Syr sheryffe for thy sake / Robyn hode wull y take.
I wyll the gyffe golde and fee This be heste þ^u holde me.
Robyn hode ffayre and fre / vndre this lynde shote we.
With the shote y wyll / Alle thy lustes to full fyll.
Have at the pryke. And y cleue the styke. 5
Late vs caste the stone / I graunte well be seynt Iohn.
Late vs caste the exaltre // Have a foote be fore the.
Syr knyght ye haue a falle. // And I. the Robyn qwyte shall
Owte on the I blowe myn horne /. Hit ware better be vn borne.
Lat vs fyght at ottraunce // He that fleth god gyfe hym myschaunce. 10
Now I haue the maystry here / off I smyte this sory swyre
This knyghtys clothis wolle I were // And in my hode his hede woll bere.
Welle mete felowe myn / what herst þ^u of gode Robyn
Robyn hode and his menye / w^t the sheryff takyn be.
Sette on foote w^t gode wyll / And the sheryffe wull we kyll 15
Be holde wele ffrere tuke // howe he dothe his bowe pluke
3eld yow syrs to the sheryffe /. Or elles shall yo^r bowes clyffe.
Now we be bownden alle in same / ffrere[]uke þis is no game.
Co[]e þ^u forth þ^u fals outlawe. þ^u shall [] hangyde and y drawe.
Now[] allas what shall we doo / we []oste to the prysone goo 20
Opy[] the yatis faste Anon // An[]te theis thevys ynne gon

Verso

Be it k[n]owne that I Iohn Sterndalle haffe Resseved of Recharð wytway penter
ffor þ^e Rent of þ^e wardorrop ffor iij quarters of A 3ere xxvij s
Item Received of Recharð wytway penter ffor hes hosse Rent in ffullpayment ix s
Item Received of Recharð wytway penter ffor hes hosse Rent in ffullpayment ix s

the vij day of november Ao Ed iiij^{ti} xv

Item *Received* of Recharde wytway penter ffor his hosse Rent in ffull
paymant ix s

Item *Received* of Recharde wytway penter ffor his hosse Rent ix s

Item *Received* of Recharde wytway penter ffor his hosse Rente ix s

APPENDIX 2

Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham

KNIGHT Syr Sheryffe, for thy sake,
 Robyn Hode wull Y take.

SHERIFF I wyll the gyffe golde and fee,
 This be-heste thou holde me.

KNIGHT Robyn Hode, ffayre and fre,
 Vndre this lynde shot we.

ROBIN With the shote Y wyll,
 Alle thy lustes to full-fyll.

KNIGHT Have at the pryke!

ROBIN And Y cleue the styke.

KNIGHT Late vs caste the stone.

ROBIN I graunte well, by Sent John!

KNIGHT Late vs caste the exaltre.
 Have a foote be-fore the.

ROBIN Syr Knyght, ye haue a falle.

KNIGHT And I the, Robyn, qwyte shall.

ROBIN Owte on the! I blowe myn horne.

KNIGHT Hit ware better be vn-borne.
 Lat vs fyght at ottraunce:
 He that fleth, God gyfe hym myschaunce!

ROBIN Now I haue the maystry here:
 Off I smyte this sory swyre.
 This knyghtys clothis wolle I were,
 And in my hode his hede woll bere.

LITTLE JOHN Welle mete, felowe myn,
 What herst thou of gode Robyn?

FRIAR TUCK Robyn Hode and his menye
 With the Sheryff takyn be.

LITTLE JOHN Sette on foote with gode wyll,

And the Sheryffe wull we kyll.
FRIAR TUCK Be-holde wele Frere Tuke,
Howe he dothe his bowe pluke!
SHERIFF Yeld yow, syrs, to the Sheryffe,
Or elles shall your bowes clyffe.
LITTLE JOHN Now we be bownden alle in same:
Frere [T]uke, this is no game.
SHERIFF Co[m]e thou forth, thou fals outlawe;
Thou shall [be] hangyde and y-drawe.
FRIAR TUCK Now[e], allas, what shall we doo?
We [m]oste to the prysone goo,
SHERIFF Opy[n] the yatis faste anon,
An[d la]te theis thevys ynne gon.

Note to the reconstruction

There have been four serious attempts to reconstruct the play by allocating speeches to characters and providing putative stage directions. In order of appearance they are *Specimens of the Pre-Shakesperean (sic) Drama*, ed. by John Matthews Manly, 2 vols (Boston: Athenaeum Press, 1897; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1967), I, 277-81; *Collections I.2*, ed. by W. W. Greg, Malone Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908), pp. 122-23; R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw* (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp. 205-07; and David Wiles, *The Early Plays of Robin Hood* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1981), pp. 34-35. A version by George Parfitt, 'Early Robin Hood Plays: Two Fragments and a Bibliography', *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, 22 (1978), 5-12 (pp. 5-6), simply replicates Manly for the first episode and Greg for the second.

There is no disagreement, in any of the versions, over the attribution of the first four couplets. Wiles then gives the invitation to shoot at the target to Robin. He is at odds with the others who are surely correct in seeing the contests initiated from the beginning by the Knight. Wiles' alternation of the lines between Robin and the Knight then differs from Manly, Greg, and Dobson and Taylor. Wiles is probably right, though for the wrong reasons, in giving the line, 'Have a foote be-fore the!', to the Knight rather than to Robin, as the others do. The line is a proposal to wrestle

(see *OED*, foot, sb. 28), and as the Knight, apparently, is the initiator of each encounter, this too should be ascribed to him. Only Wiles has Robin blow the horn. This not only fits the blowing of Sir Guy's horn by Robin in the ballad, *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, which the Sheriff interprets as a sign of the knight's success, but is also an appropriate response by Robin to the Knight's preceding threat, in the play, to kill him. All four reconstructions have Robin proposing the fight to the death. This seems inconsistent for three reasons. The Knight has, probably, been the instigator of all the previous contests. In the face of a succession of defeats, the Knight resorts to a death threat that he carries through to the challenge. The word 'ottraunce' is more aptly spoken by the Knight than someone of Robin's assumed social status (see the text of the essay for a fuller explanation). On the issue of the Knight's defeats, it is worth observing that although Robin is often the loser of contests in the later ballads this is invariably to opponents who subsequently become members of his outlaw band. He rarely, if ever, loses in single combat to the representatives of corrupt authority.

In the second episode Manly, somewhat obscurely, has Robin speak the opening couplet. All the others give it to Little John. Although the speaker is the only character not mentioned by name or title in the play, his identification is based on the centrality of Little John to the ballad. Analogy with the same source prompts Greg, and Dobson and Taylor to attribute the following speech to Will Scarlet. This seems unnecessary. Scarlet's role in the ballad is silent and limited to facilitating the plot in a way that is not determined by character. Manly gets around the problem by using the uncontentious 'Man'. Wiles is probably closer in giving it to Friar Tuck, who is mentioned further on in the play as one of those captured by the Sheriff. In terms of dramatic practicality, the inclusion of Will Scarlet is an extravagance. Consequent upon this allocation is Friar Tuck indulging in boastful self-promotion (Wiles), rather than Scarlet or Little John describing his display of archery (Greg, and Dobson and Taylor). This is not only in keeping with later developments in the character but provides a comic distraction that contributes to the capture of the outlaws. There is general agreement over the distribution of lines once the Sheriff enters. Wiles, though, somewhat idiosyncratically, has Robin reappear after the Sheriff has announced sentence on the outlaws, and with his men bundle Nottingham into his own prison.

Since the writing of this essay a new reconstruction has appeared in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. by Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), pp. 276-80. The first episode of this version follows Wiles with the exception of reversing the attribution

of the lines, 'Have at the pryke!' and 'And Y cleue the styke'. The second episode is very close to that given above. The only differences are the naming of the first two speakers as Outlaw 1 and Outlaw 2 rather than Little John and Friar Tuck, and the assigning of the penultimate couplet to Outlaw 1 (Little John above) rather than to Friar Tuck (equivalent to Outlaw 2).

NOTES

¹ For a representative sample of recent works see the following: R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw* (London: Heinemann, 1976); David Wiles, *The Early Plays of Robin Hood* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1981); David Mills, 'Robin Hood Plays', in *The Revels History of Drama in English: Volume 1, Medieval Drama*, ed. by Lois Potter (London: Methuen, 1983), pp. 133-38; Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 98-115; Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 31-33; *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. by Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), pp. 5-7 and 269-80.

² For details of the transmission of the manuscript in the context of the inheritance and purchase of the Paston papers see *The Paston Letters 1422-1509AD*, ed. by James Gairdner, 6 vols (London: Chatto & Windus; Exeter: Commin, 1904; repr. Gloucester: Sutton, 1983), I, 1-23; *Collections I.2*, ed. by W. W. Greg, Malone Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908), pp. 118-19; *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Norman Davis, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), I, pp. xxiv-xxxii.

³ For extracts of the will of Peter le Neve and Martin's inheritance see Gairdner, I, 330-31.

⁴ J. M. G., 'Dr Stukeley's Manuscripts, Drawings, and Books', *Notes and Queries*, 12 (27 October 1855), 321-22.

⁵ *The Household Books of John Howard, Duke of Norfolk, 1462-1471, 1481-1483*, introduction by Anne Crawford (Stroud: Sutton, 1992), p. xi.

⁶ Gairdner, I, 6.

⁷ *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. by Francis James Child, 5 vols (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882-98), III (1888), 90.

⁸ Davis, I, 461. References to *Paston Letters and Papers* are by page number not item number.

⁹ The earliest reference outside of MS R.2.64 to the Sheriff of Nottingham in a play or game occurs in the proposition made by Richard Morison, in c. 1535, that 'playes of Robyn hoode, mayde Marian, freer Tuck . . . [and] the shiref of Notyngham' be prohibited in favour of anti-Catholic propaganda. See Ian Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain: A Chronological Topography to 1558* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 65. The earliest reference to a specific location is as late as 1572-73. At Yeovil, the churchwardens of St John the Baptist account for 'a grene silke Rebyn for the Sheriffe'; *Records of Early English Drama: Somerset*, ed. by James Stokes, 2 vols (Toronto:

University of Toronto Press, 1996), I, 410.

¹⁰ For the view that the Robin Hood game was carnivalesque and gave 'formal expression to repressed political tendencies' see Wiles, pp. 51-58, and Peter Stallybrass, "'Drunk with the cup of liberty": Robin Hood, the Carnavalesque, and the Rhetoric of Violence in Early Modern England', *Semiotica*, 54 (1985), 113-45.

¹¹ These dimensions differ from those given in, *Non-Cycle Plays and the Winchester Dialogues: Facsimiles of Plays and Fragments in Various Manuscripts and the Dialogues in Winchester College MS 33*, ed. by Norman Davis, Leeds Texts and Monographs: Medieval Drama Facsimiles, 5 (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1979), p. 75. Davis's measurement of 185mm (7¹/₄ inches) for the length is an inch short.

¹² The booklets that make up the Macro and Digby play collections of the second half of the fifteenth century, for example, average about 215mm x 160mm, but the writing rarely takes up more than the 115mm of the opening line of MS R.2.64. *The Pride of Life* manuscript divided the play into four columns separated by vertical lines; see Davis, *Non-Cycle Plays: Facsimile*, p. 23.

¹³ I am following the convention of ascribing the Robin Hood text to the recto of the manuscript that assumes its priority over the account on the verso. There is, though, no internal evidence of precedence.

¹⁴ Davis, *Non-Cycle Plays: Facsimile*, p. 75.

¹⁵ Greg, p. 118.

¹⁶ See, for example, the Walwayne crest reproduced in Howard de Walden, *Banners, Standards, and Badges from a Tudor Manuscript in the College of Arms*, with an Introduction by Howard de Walden (privately printed: de Walden Library, 1904), p. 287. There is also some resemblance, in style if not species, between the wyvern/dragon of the manuscript and the similarly coloured lizard crest of Farington in the near contemporary 'Ballards Book', College of Arms MS M.3, fol. 37^v, reproduced in Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), plate 22. I am extremely grateful to Robert Yorke, archivist of the College of Arms, for his help in this matter. He doubts that the beast depicted in the manuscript has any heraldic significance. However, I persist in the association with a crest or badge in order to cover a range of possibilities.

¹⁷ Benjamin R. McRee, 'Unity or Division? The Social Meaning of Guild Ceremony in Urban Communities', in *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Barbara A. Hanawalt and Kathryn L. Reyerson, Medieval Studies at Minnesota, 6 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 189-207 (p. 200).

¹⁸ *Records of the Gild of St George in Norwich, 1389-1547: A Transcript with an Introduction*, ed. by Mary Grace, Norfolk Record Society, 9 (1937), p. 67.

¹⁹ His grandfather, William, and his brother, John, were members of the gild. See Grace, p. 23 and p. 90. E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1903), I, 223, mistakes the latter for a reference to Sir John Paston who was dead by the time of the 17 March 1497 memorandum.

²⁰ Hilda Amphlett, *Hats: A History of Fashion in Headwear* (Chalfont St Giles: Sadler, 1974), pp. 82-84.

²¹ For details of royal and noble wardrobes see John Schofield, *Medieval London Houses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 35, and Pamela Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocers' Company and the Politics and Trade of London 1000-1485* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 106.

²² Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Fastolf's Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²³ Richmond, pp. 178-79.

²⁴ Richmond, pp. 188-96.

²⁵ See the letter (9 November 1468), concerning the preparations, from Sir John Paston to his brother at Caister; Davis, I, 398-99.

²⁶ For the dates of the siege of Caister see the account in, *William Worcestre Itineraries*, ed. by John H. Harvey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 186-87. For a detailed description and analysis of the events see Richmond, pp. 192-209. For Paston letters concerning the surrender, Davis, I, 546, and II, 431-32.

²⁷ Gairdner, V, 92, for an abstract of the renunciation, and Richmond, p. 226, for commentary.

²⁸ *Worcestre Itineraries*, pp. 252-53, and Richmond, p. 232.

²⁹ Sir John Paston petitioned Edward IV in 1475; Davis, I, 487-89. He wrote to his mother concerning its progress on 27 May 1476; Davis, I, 494-95. And to his brother on its success on 30 June 1476; Davis, I, 496-97.

³⁰ The wardrobe was probably situated in the inner court of the castle. See H. D. Barnes and W. Douglas Simpson, 'The Building Accounts of Caister Castle AD 1432-1435', *Norfolk Archaeology*, 30 (1951), 178-88; and, by the same authors, 'Caister Castle', *The Antiquaries Journal*, 32 (1952), 35-51. For the contents of the wardrobe see the transcript by Francis Blomefield in 'Letter from Thomas Amyot, Esq. F. R. S. Treasurer, to the Earl of Aberdeen, K. T. President, Accompanying a Transcript of Two Rolls, Containing an Inventory of Effects Formerly Belonging to Sir John Fastolfe', *Archaeologia*, 21 (1827), 232-79 (pp. 252-61).

³¹ See the inventory and indenture (6 June 1462) made by John Paston I; Davis, I, 107-14 (p. 111). Where the contents had gone is not clear. John Paston I denies knowledge of the Fastolf wardrobe inventory; Davis, I, 109. His brother, William, was exhorting him

to remove Fastolf's goods and 'ley it secretly' only a week after Fastolf died; Davis, I, 157.

³² Davis, II, 431-32.

³³ Davis, I, 550.

³⁴ Davis, I, 488.

³⁵ Davis, II, 402.

³⁶ Davis, I, 434-36.

³⁷ Davis, I, 576.

³⁸ Davis, I, 553.

³⁹ Lucy Ellen Moye, 'The Estates and Finances of the Mowbray Family, Earls Marshal and Dukes of Norfolk, 1401-1476' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Duke University, 1985), p. 201.

⁴⁰ Davis, I, 496-97. On 21 March 1476, Sir John Paston was still unsure of when he 'maye entre Castre'; Davis, I, 494.

⁴¹ Davis, I, 497-98.

⁴² Davis, I, 516-18 (p. 518).

⁴³ Wood actually left Sir John Paston four days before the letter was written; see Davis, I, 458.

⁴⁴ Margaret Paston reports Daubeney's death in a letter to her son written on 12 September 1469; Davis, I, 344. Richmond, p. 200, suggests 9 September 1469 as the date of his death.

⁴⁵ *Worcestre Itineraries*, pp. 190-91.

⁴⁶ Davis, I, 463 (3 June 1473).

⁴⁷ Davis, I, 398-99.

⁴⁸ Davis, I, 542 (May 1469).

⁴⁹ Davis, I, 400-01.

⁵⁰ Davis, I, 543-45.

⁵¹ Davis, I, 437-38, and 439-41.

⁵² A similar fate befell other, more valuable, manuscripts belonging to Sir John Paston. He was still trying to have his books restored to him in November 1472; Davis, I, 453-54.

⁵³ I am grateful to Jean Kennedy, County Archivist of Norwich Record Office, for confirming that no reference to a 'wardrobe' is known in any Norwich context.

⁵⁴ Child, III, 90.

⁵⁵ *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, ed. by Thomas Percy, 3 vols (London: Dodsley, 1765). For *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* see Dobson and Taylor, pp. 140-45, and for *Robin Hood and the Monk*, pp. 113-22; for the dating see p. 114.

⁵⁶ The earliest reference to Friar Tuck participating in Robin Hood games is from

Kingston-upon-Thames. He had probably entered the game by 1509, although his name, rather than title, is not used until slightly later. See Wiles, pp. 24-26; Michael Heaney, 'Kingston to Kenilworth: Early Plebeian Morris', *Folklore*, 100 (1989), 88-104; Sally Beth MacLean, 'King Games and Robin Hood: Play and Profit at Kingston Upon Thames', in *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, 13, ed. by Edelgard E. DuBruck and William C. McDonald (Stuttgart: Heinz, 1988), pp. 309-20.

⁵⁷ Dobson and Taylor, p. 204.

⁵⁸ Wiles, pp. 33-35.

⁵⁹ Knight, p. 101.

⁶⁰ Davis, I, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv.

⁶¹ Davis, *Non-Cycle Plays: Facsimile*, p. 75 notes creases at the top and bottom of the paper, but these are small and, apparently, insignificant.

⁶² Greg, p. 118.

⁶³ The earliest reference to what may be a Robin Hood play is from Exeter in 1427; 'Item dato lusoribus ludentibus lusum Robyn Hood'; *Records of Early English Drama: Devon*, ed. by John M. Wasson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 89. In spite of the apparent precision of the terminology, it is possible that the reference is to a game of Robin Hood, rather than a play. The next recorded occurrence, after the probable date of *Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham*, is a Robin Hood ale at Thame in 1474; W. Patterson Ellis, 'The Churchwardens' Accounts of the Parish of St Mary, Thame', *Berks, Bucks and Oxon Archaeological Journal*, 19 (1913), 20-24 and 84-86 (p. 22). Croscombe was not far behind with a Robin Hood gathering in 1476; *Somerset*, I, 86. In connection with the earliest reference from Exeter, it is worth noting that there is a remote possibility that Richard Wytway introduced Sir John Paston to the Robin Hood game. Wytway is, in origin, a Devon name; see P. H. Reaney, *A Dictionary of British Surnames* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959). Whiteway Barton, a mile north-east of Kingsteignton, and Whiteway Wood, two miles north of Chudleigh, are both less than ten miles south of Exeter and surrounded by sites of Robin Hood games in the sixteenth century: Ashburton, Chagford, Chudleigh and Woodbury; *Devon*, pp. 21, 25, 54-57, 284-86. The churchwarden's accounts of these places are either too late or not specific enough to tell whether Robin Hood games existed there in the fifteenth century, as was the case in Exeter. If Wytway was the source of Sir John Paston's interest it implies that they knew each other prior to Wytway's tenancy of the wardrobe in 1474.

⁶⁴ Norfolk Record Office, MS KIM 1/9/16. I am extremely grateful to Colin Richmond for drawing my attention to this roll. The only other reference to it, as far as I know, is Paul Rutlege, 'Steracles in Norfolk', *Records of Early English Drama Newsletter*, 20.2 (1995), 15-16.

⁶⁵ Francis Blomefield, *An Essay Towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, 11 vols (London: Miller, 1805-10), VI (1807), 18.

⁶⁶ *Records of Plays and Players in Norfolk and Suffolk 1330-1642*, ed. by John Wasson and David Galloway, Malone Society Collections, 11 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980-81), p. 8.

⁶⁷ G. A. Lester, 'The Books of a Fifteenth-Century English Gentleman, Sir John Paston', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 88 (1987), 200-17.

⁶⁸ G. A. Lester, *Sir John Paston's 'Grete Boke': A Descriptive Catalogue, with an Introduction, of British Library MS Lansdowne 285* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1984), pp. 150-53.

⁶⁹ The letter survives only in a seventeenth-century transcript (see Davis, I, 396) but its content seems genuine from his brother's less than enthusiastic reply; Davis, I, 534-35.

⁷⁰ For John Paston's description see Davis, I, 538-40. For the jousts and tournament see Richard Barber and Juliet Barker, *Tournaments: Jousts, Chivalry and Pageants in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989), pp. 121-24.

⁷¹ Gordon Kipling, *The Triumph of Honour: Burgundian Origins of the Elizabethan Renaissance* (The Hague: Leiden University Press, 1977), p. 117.

⁷² Lester, *Grete Boke*, pp. 118-22.

⁷³ For the verse see Davis, I, 452; and for the 'litell Torke', Davis, I, 415.

⁷⁴ Davis, I, pp. xxxv-xxxix.

⁷⁵ Davis, *Non-Cycle Plays: Facsimile*, p. 76.

⁷⁶ *MED*, *outraunce*, n(2)(e).

⁷⁷ Barber and Barker, p. 126.

⁷⁸ Davis, I, 517, and Lester, 'Books', p. 204. It is possible that either Sir John's nephew or great nephew inherited his interest in manuscripts and Robin Hood. The unique copy of the ballad of *Robin Hood and the Potter* survives in an early sixteenth-century manuscript miscellany, Cambridge, University Library, MS Ee.4.35. On fol. 24^v appears the merchant mark and inscription of ownership of Richard Calle; see *A Catalogue of the Manuscripts Preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge*, ed. by C. Hardwick and others, 5 vols (London: Hamilton Adams; Cambridge: Deighton Bell, 1856-67), II (1857), 168. Julia Boffey and Carol M. Meale, 'Selecting the Text: Rawlinson C.86 and Some Other Books for London Readers', in *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts: Essays Celebrating the Publication of A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, ed. by Felicity Riddy (Cambridge: Brewer, 1991), pp. 143-69 (p. 160, n. 54), note that comparison of the manuscript signature with the handwriting of Richard Calle, the Paston bailiff who married Margery Paston, indicates that he was not the owner. It could have belonged to their third son who is described by Charles S. Romanes, *The Calls of Norfolk*

and Suffolk: *Their Paston Connections and Descendants* (privately printed: Constable, 1920) as 'of Norwich' in the family tree appended to that work. This may be the same Richard Calle who was admitted as a mercer to the freedom of Norwich in 1526-27; see *Calendar of the Freemen of Norwich From 1317 to 1603*, ed. by John L'Estrange and Walter Rye (London: Elliot Stock, 1888), p. 26. Alternatively, it could be the eldest son of John Calle who was the son and heir of Richard Calle and Margery Paston. This Richard is described as 'of Little Melton' in *The Visitations of Norfolk, 1563, 1589, and 1613*, ed. by Walter Rye, Publications of the Harleian Society, 32 (London: 1891), p. 63, and as 'a dyer' by Romanes.

⁷⁹ Davis, *Non-Cycle Plays: Facsimile*, p. 76, and Wiles, p. 36.

⁸⁰ Dobson and Taylor, p. 142, stanza 11.

⁸¹ Davis, *Non-Cycle Plays: Facsimile*, p. 76, and Wiles, p. 36. Both interpret the letter that mentions the play as meaning that Paston was a patron of a troupe of players. The situation is much less formal. He seems to be supporting two seasonal events.

⁸² Davis, I, 577.

⁸³ Davis, I, 582.

⁸⁴ Davis, I, 579.

⁸⁵ Davis, I, 463.

⁸⁶ Davis, I, 536.

⁸⁷ Davis, I, 473-74.

⁸⁸ Wiles, p. 66, n. iii, points out that E. K. Chambers, I, 177, n. 6, is mistaken in his reference to a Robin Hood play in the Northumberland household.

⁸⁹ *Records of Early English Drama: Shropshire*, ed. by J. Alan B. Somerset, 2 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), II, 404.

⁹⁰ Anna J. Mill, *Medieval Plays in Scotland*, St Andrews University Publications, 24 (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1927).

⁹¹ *Records of Early English Drama: Herefordshire and Worcestershire*, ed. by David N. Klausner (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, c. 1990), p. 513. See also David N. Klausner, 'Parish Drama in Worcester and the Journal of Prior William More', in *English Parish Drama*, ed. by Alexandra F. Johnston and Wim Hüskén, 'Ludus': Medieval and Early Renaissance Theatre and Drama, 1 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 119-35 (p. 128).

⁹² Davis, II, 426. There is a problem in assuming this to be a reference to the Norwich Corpus Christi play because of the lack of evidence for it in the city during the fifteenth century. See Joanna Dutka, 'Mystery Plays at Norwich: Their Formation and Development', *Leeds Studies in English*, 10 (1978), 107-20 (esp. p. 111). However, the letter was written by J. Whetley, a Paston servant, on Corpus Christi eve, from Norwich.

⁹³ The quotation is from Knight, p. 88, in reference to the *Gest of Robin Hood*.

'goon in-to Bernysdale': The Trail of the Paston Robin Hood Play

⁹⁴ Richmond, pp. 165-216.

⁹⁵ Davis, II, 302-06.

⁹⁶ Margaret Paston likens John Heydon to Pilate (24 June 1465); Davis, I, 307; and John Paston describes the earl of Arran in terms of Arthurian hyperbole (5 June 1472); Davis, I, 574-75.

⁹⁷ Dobson and Taylor, p. 36.