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Folklore, collective memory and popular protest in seventeenth-century Forest of Dean

The free miners of the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire have long claimed that their customary mining rights were granted to them by Edward I in return for military service at the Siege of Berwick in 1296. Whatever the origin of these rights, they defined the relative autonomy of this industrial group and were regulated through the strict monopoly of the Mine Law Court, which met before a jury of 12, 24, or 48 miners according to circumstance and held a strict monopoly of jurisdiction over this industry. To be a free miner, 'ancient' custom dictated, one had to have been born within the hundred of St Briavels, to be the son of a free miner, and to have worked in a mine for a year and a day. These miners were also part of a wider community that had traditionally depended on a complex set of common rights accommodated by royal forest management. The seventeenth century witnessed a two-pronged assault on forest custom from both changing Crown policies and novel opportunities for private projectors, several of whom were members of the local gentry. These encroachments not only impeded the exercise of mining custom, but also disrupted common rights to grazing and fuel. The reliance of miners on both sets of rights, together with their symbolic position within the forest commonalty, foreshadows their heavy involvement in organising resistance to the enclosure and privatisation of forest wastes.

Two major episodes occurred in the early seventeenth century in reaction to this breach of 'ancient' forest custom. The first disturbance, in 1612, was the consequence of a royal grant to the Earl of Pembroke which allowed him novel and exclusive access to resources from an area of Dean's woodlands. The 'Skimmington riots' of 1628-31 followed a similar pattern of resistance when Sir Edward Villiers, brother of court favourite George, was granted possession of Mailescott Woods, an area towards the industrial north of the Forest. This paper offers a dramaturgical and sociological reading of the latter episode, examining the relationship between folkloric cultural idioms and the leadership of protest in seventeenth-century England.

The Skimmington riots

At 10am on the morning of 25 March 1631, Robert Bridges sat at home with his family in Bicknor, an industrial village towards the north-east of the Forest of Dean. He described how

their house was marched upon by a group of inhabitants from their village and from Stanton, Newland and Coleford. The band numbered at least five hundred and 'did march with two Drummes two Coulers and one Fife and in a warlike and outragious manner did assemble themselves together Armed with gunnes, pykes, halberds and other weapons'.[1] After threatening to 'pull downe Bridges' howse', they 'went into the ground called Mailescott, and there did extreamly beate certain Colliers being in the said Grounds and one other person being a Strainger'.[2] Bridges was an agent of the Villiers family, favourites of the Caroline court who, in 1625, had been granted mineral rights in Mailescott Woods, an area of Dean adjoining Bicknor. Among the marching group in March 1631 was John Williams, also known as the mysterious Skymington, an alias that appears to have held great regional significance. He was recorded as a 'labourer', a description which was interchangeable locally with the term miner.

During March and April 1631 in Dean, enclosed lands were thrown open by large numbers of rioting commoners led by Williams. The direct interests of the Crown and local industrialists were generally avoided which suggests efforts to maintain the legitimacy of these actions. The symbolism of these riots suggests much about solidarities and conflicts within this forest community. As rioters attempted to pull down the fences erected by Mompesson, they acted:

> by sound of drum and ensigns in most rebellious manner, carrying a picture or statue apparelled like Mompesson and with great noise and clamour threw it into the coalpits that the said Sir Giles had digged.[3]

Given the nature of these disturbances, it is no surprise that the leader or leaders were commonly referred to as 'John' or 'Lady Skymington'. This action was, it seems, was framed in the idiom of popular shaming rituals.[4]

David Underdown notes that a skimmington was 'a ritual action against the chosen target: to 'ride skimmington' was to take part in a demonstration against the skimmington in the pejorative sense'. The name skimmington had a variety of meanings within early modern popular culture. It could refer to the target of a shaming ritual, the act itself or, as in the case

[1] TNA, SP16/188/20.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] For further work on the symbolism of early modern popular crowd action, see J. Walter, 'Gesturing at authority: deciphering the gestural code of early modern England', in M. J. Braddick (ed.), *The Politics of Gesture: Historical Perspectives,* Past and Present, Supplement, 4 (Oxford, 2009), 96-127; D. Underdown, ''But the shows of their street': Civic Pageantry and Charivari in a Somerset Town, 1607', *Journal of British Studies*, 50, 1 (2011), 4-23.

of Dean, to the leadership of a protest. This ambivalence allowed separate risings to subsume themselves as part of a wider and more general action and, importantly, it obscured identities. As the royal grant to Mailescott drew a distinction between informal usages and private property rights, so too did it drive a wedge through this sylvan culture. The skimmington seems to have been an appropriate response to this violation of Forest custom. Through the ritual grammar of the skimmington, the rioters highlighted a breach of customary norms represented by the increasing interest of outsiders in the regulation and ownership of forest resources. Rachel Bonney remarks that anthropologists have 'recognised the importance in 'primitive' societies of folklore as an educational tool for the transmission of cultural traditions, values, and histories from one generation to the next'.[5] These rituals articulated a particular version of Forest history, a tradition steeped in paternalism, common right, shared labour and a fierce tenacity in defending this lifestyle. This simplification obscured much conflict of course, but it was an ideal that implicitly called upon local gentry to restore order by stopping the Villiers family's attempts to dominate traditionally collective resources. Local gentry were, however, involved in seventeenth-century attempts to 'improve' the Forest. Perhaps, however, they were still regarded as the most effective group to petition in the cause of preserving Forest custom.

The customary version of Forest history was heavily idealised but, articulated in the form of the folk hero Skymington, it was flexible and could, therefore, accommodate contradictory interests in the cause of fostering broad solidarities. Roland Barthes described mythological speech as a 'formless, unstable, nebulous condensation' ideally suited to appropriation as it only gains unity and coherence through its specific application or function.[6] The mythologised folk hero offers a simplification of complex relationships and histories. Skymington presented an ideal, a flexible tradition which could look beyond the antagonisms of everyday forest life to garner support for collective action. This loose folk memory was incompatible with the strict written record of private property ownership. Economic and cultural distinctions between common rights and private property were tied to different ways of seeing forest history which were held up in relief by the symbolism and actions of rioters in early-seventeenth century Dean.

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[5] R. A. Bonney, 'Teaching Anthropology Through Folklore', *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 16, 4 Teaching Anthropology (1985), 265-270.
[6] R. Barthes, *Mythologies: Selected and translated from the French by Annette Lavers* (London, 2000), 110.

Sociologists have highlighted the dramaturgical and performative aspect of everyday actions. Erving Goffman posited that people in a social context 'dramatize' their actions to manage the way that they are interpreted by others. Central here is his concept of 'front' which he explains as a range of standardized expressive mechanisms that people adopt in suggesting a generalised and intersubjective view of situations. For Goffman, 'front' relates primarily to 'setting', or the spatial location of action, while the notion of 'personal front' refers to the 'manner' and 'appearance' of performance.[7] The two concepts explain ways that action can suggest a generalised reality, emphasising the most desirable aspects of behaviour. These insights offer useful ways of interpreting the significance of John Williams' adopted alias, his cultural position as a free miner, and the ritual symbolism of the Skimmington protest against Bridges and Mompesson acted out in the contested area of Mailescott Woods.

During the first years of Charles I's personal rule, Underdown suggests, 'Skimmington briefly becomes a folk hero, similar to Robin Hood or to 'Captain Cobbler' and 'Captain Pouch' in earlier peasant risings, regarded as able to redress all sorts of popular grievances.[8] The records of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century protest give us the names of many figures, real and imagined, who appear to have performed the twin function of drawing support for, and declaring the cause of, popular risings. Many of these famously assumed the rank of captain. The Lincolnshire Uprising and the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536 were partly inspired by Captain Cobbler (shoemaker Nicholas Melton of Louth, Lincolnshire) and various figures named Captain Poverty. Early seventeenth-century grievances produced Captain Pouch (also known as John Reynolds of Desborough, Northamptonshire), Captain Dorothy Dawson in Yorkshire, and Captain Ann Carter in Maldon, Essex.[9]

These particular traditions have been traced to biblical analogies between Christ and the sanctity of poverty. They appear in fourteenth-century texts such as *Piers Plowman* but they did not only derive from literary models. The *Piers Plowman* text grew out of a broader cultural context and wider forms of intersubjective experience in medieval England. These allegorical displays of community values were also associated with the processions of feast days and holy days. The performance of mystery and morality plays were a regular feature of

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[7] E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London, 1990), 30-34.
[8] Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion,* 110-11.
[9] J. Walter, 'Grain riots and popular attitudes to the law: Maldon and the crisis of 1629', in J. Brewer and J. Styles (eds.), *An Ungovernable People: The English and their Law in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (London, Hutchinson and Rutgers, 1980), 47-84; B. Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), 316-7; J. Walter, 'Reynolds, John'. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online ed.). Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/67261 Date accessed: 14/09/2012.

community life and popular interaction with church liturgy and guild fraternities.[10] The most well-known of these plays, *Everyman*, is an allegory populated by such characters as Good-Deeds, Angel, Knowledge, Beauty, Discretion, and Strength.[11] Other morality plays introduced figures such as Justice and Equity and were attached to religious festivals, marking significant holidays as they were enacted by guilds and other bodies.[12] These performances often involved the entire community and took the neighbourhood or local environment as their setting, imbuing significant places with symbolic significance.[13]

These traditions of community theatre embedded a familiarity with reading allegorical representations that were spatially-situated and articulated shared moral concepts. Moreover, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there appears to have been a familiarity with acting upon these theatrical models. The symbolism of protest reveals embedded traditions of community theatre, literary inheritances, and scriptural tropes that underpinned the dramatisation of action. The nature of the Skimmington disturbances underlines Goffman's assertions about the significant spatial dimension of dramatised social actions. Skymington as folk leader highlighted a threat to the region's shared cultural values and the perceived assault on ancient forest custom.

Despite their local nature, these riots should be interpreted in the context of wider disturbances outside the Forest and across the south-west of England. The Western Rising of 1628-31 was largely a protest against the enclosure:

> of the three Royal Forests of Gillingham in Dorset, Braydon in Wiltshire and Dean in Gloucestershire, but it derived its unity from the leadership of the mysterious Lady Skimmington … apparently the pseudonym of a certain John Williams who, although he possessed influence on both sides of the Bristol Channel, probably received the name from Wiltshire followers, for it is from an old custom of that county that it is derived.[14]

That so many suspected rioters took refuge in Dean's neighbouring counties, together with their threats to call upon 500 Monmouthshire men, suggests that popular political

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[10] P. M. King, 'Morality Plays', in R. Beadle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* (Cambridge, 1994), 240-64.
[11] A. C. Cawley, *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (London, 1956; reprint, London, 1990).
[12] S. Beckwith, 'Ritual, Church and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body', in D. Aers (ed.), *Culture and History, 1350-1600* (Detroit, 1992), 65-89.
[13] S. Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago and London, 2001), 36-37.
[14] D. G. C. Allan, 'The Rising in the West, 1628-1631', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 5, 1 (1952), 76.

communication extended beyond the physical limits of this particular forest. A 1631 entry in the *Calendar of State Papers* suggests Williams' influence on other communities in the south-west of England during this period. Several of these were in forests which had been the subject of more extensive disafforestation than the projects in Dean. The *Calendar* entry for 23 June recorded the recollections of William Gough, suspected leader of disturbances on the 'New-Gained Grounds' of Lord Berkeley at Frampton and Slembridge to the east of the River Severn. According to Sir William Guise and Nathaniel Stephens, Justices of the Peace, Gough had been drinking with some other soldiers when conversation turned to:

> what Skimmington had done for the Forest of Dean, and of the stirs in the Forest of Brayden, they agreed that if the country would allow victuals and other content to Skimmington and his company, they would come to Frampton and Slimbridge, and throw open the new enclosures.[15]

Whether or not Williams was physically present in any other disturbances, knowledge of his activities influenced inhabitants of other forested areas in this region which experienced similar assaults on local custom. The communication structures of local militias could also transmit news of popular resistance. Underdown notes that 'there were long traditions behind the foresters' forcible defence of common rights'.[16] Assuming the guise of John Skymington, Williams was able to articulate the target of local grievances while simultaneously allowing multiple risings in this region to subsume themselves under a common leadership in the minds of the local population.

The skimmington ritual and, by extension, the leadership of John Skymington, symbolised a breach of custom that was central to the world-view of local inhabitants and which had allowed them access to forest resources since a 'time out of mind of man'. The riots thus highlighted the wedge which was being driven through an, admittedly idealised, forest community by enclosure. Broadly speaking, this was a division between those who had tenure of property and those who depended upon less formal access to forest wastes. Calling on ancient custom in this manner, rioters were able to foreground the hierarchy of use rights which they felt was being lost through 'improvement' of the forest. Victor Turner provides a theoretical model which complements Goffman's work on symbolic social action, illuminating the nature of these disorders and the role of the Skymington figure. His notion of

[15] TNA, SP16/194/60.
[16] Underdown, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion,* 110.

social drama conceptualises the context in which John Williams' dramaturgical performance sought to broadcast the initial breach to the most potent effect in drawing support. According to Turner, 'a moral law is more vividly made known through its breach'.[17] This clearly describes the impact of seventeenth-century attempts to improve and enclose Dean. Williams' attempt to redress this breach raises important questions over the miners' role in steering a course between subsequent compromise or permanent division in the Forest during the following two centuries.[18] The second phase in Turner's model is characterised by mounting crisis:

> during which, unless the breach can be sealed off quickly within a limited area of social interaction, there is a tendency for the breach to widen and extend until it becomes coextensive with some dominant cleavage in the widest set of relevant social relations to which the conflicting or antagonistic parties belong.[19]

This illuminates the broad alignment of those resisting innovation, not only in Dean, but also other forested areas in the south west of England. This breach seems to have pitched 'improving' and 'customary' ideologies against each other in a manner which highlighted horizontal patterns of affiliation and collective interest across a wider area than is usually expected in seventeenth-century England. This conflict had engendered a cleavage in the 'widest set of social relations' relevant to these two conflicting ideologies.

Although not inspired by class antagonism in a modern sense, the geographical spread of these forest riots clearly generated much anxiety in central government. Sharp notes that, despite their relative lack of violence and staunch localism, 'the government regarded the disorders which compose the Western Rising as insurrections threatening the good order and stability of the state'.[20]

This paper has examined the symbolic role of the mining community in organising and articulating resistance to the breach of custom in Dean during the early seventeenth century. The free miners were clearly central to local perceptions of the past which underwrote traditional claims to resources at a time when local custom was under assault from both local and external interests. This vision was integrally linked to the symbolism of protest in the 1620s which, however, focused on the intrusion of outsiders. A folkloric reading of the

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[17] V. W. Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (New York, 1974), 37-42.
[18] Wood, 'Collective violence', 107.
[19] Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, 37-42.
[20] Sharp, *In Contempt of All Authority,* 96.

Skimmington riots emphasises the performative aspects of early modern popular protest. In a dramaturgical sense, the folk hero John Skymington emerges as a figurehead embodying collective values and garnering support by projecting a simplification of complex and often conflicting relationships. This type of folk culture, it is argued, worked to transmit these values and traditions of protest from one generation to the next. John Williams, as a free miner, clearly articulated memories of living and labouring in this traditional 'open' forest and offered a powerful focus for resistance against plans to improve or enclose large areas of the Forest of Dean. Following Turner's model of social drama, John Skymington also symbolised a breach of custom which generated a cleavage between two conflicting ideologies which was evidently felt and recognised outside the immediate context of the Forest of Dean during the late 1620s. These models allow us to think about the nexus of folklore, occupational identity, and popular protest in a way which partly explains how local protests were able to become more widespread in a period before the later eighteenth-century development of mass print communication and the emergence of a national working-class consciousness.

2794 words (excluding footnotes)