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Thomas Peacock's Maid Marian:

A Humorist's Treatment of Traditional Materials
(TITLE)

BY

Ronald D. Sneed

PLAN B PAPER

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE MASTER OF SCIENCE IN EDUCATION
AND PREPARED IN COURSE

English 585

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY,
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1966-67

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS PLAN B PAPER BE ACCEPTED AS
FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE DEGREE, M.S. IN ED.

14 Dec. 1967

DATE

ADVISER

1 Feb 67

DATE

DEPARTMENT HEAD

Thomas Love Peacock is a little known but delightful nineteenth century English author. His seven works - Headlong Hall (1815), Melincourt (1817), Nightmare Abbey (1818), Maid Marian (1822), The Misfortunes of Elphin (1829), Crochet Castle (1831), and Gryll Grange (1860) -- Ian Jack calls satiric tales.¹ Traditionally, these works have been referred to as novels and would qualify under Thrall and Hibbard's handbook definition of a novel as any extended piece of prose fiction.² Maid Marian, the midpoint of his work, is representative and especially interesting because of Peacock's treatment of traditional materials.

Peacock's novels share many of the same characteristics. The setting is always romantic, the plot is simple (what plot there is), and it is the characters and above all the conversation that is important in them.

We are introduced to the main characters and feel at once the tone of the novel in the first scene of Maid Marian. It begins in the abbey-chapel of Rubygill. The occasion is the wedding of Matilda Fitzwater, daughter of the Baron of Arlingford, and the

¹Ian Jack, English Literature 1815-1832 (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 213.

²William Flint Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 318.

noble Robert Fitz-Ooth, Earl of Locksley and Huntingdon. The abbot begins "to intone the ceremony in a style of modulation impressively exalted, his voice issuing most canonically from the roof of his mouth, through the medium of a very musical nose newly tuned for the occasion."³ The abbot does not get very far into the ceremony before a party of armed men enters the chapel and the leader strides up to the altar and places himself between the earl and Matilda. He exclaims, "In the name of King Henry, I forbid the ceremony, and attach Robert Earl of Huntingdon as a traitor!"⁴ At the same time he draws his sword and places it between the lovers. The earl draws his sword and strikes down the interposing weapon, clasping Matilda to himself with his left arm. The earl's yeomen range themselves about him. The abbot exhorts, "My children, if you are going to cut each other's throats I entreat you, in the name of peace and charity, to do it out of the chapel."⁵

Robert Fitz-Ooth proclaims Matilda and himself married in the eyes of his only saint, Our Lady; kisses Matilda, consigns her to Lord Fitzwater, and with a sign to his followers, makes a sudden charge on the soldiers. What follows is a typical Peacockian scene of chaos, confusion, and farcical humor. The women scream; the abbot takes hasty leave of the chapel; leaving

³Thomas Love Peacock, The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.), p. 174.

⁴Ibid., ⁵Ibid., 175.

as fast as his bulk, and his holy robes would permit, roaring 'Sacrilege!' with all his monks at his heels, who were, like himself, more intent to go at once than to stand upon the order of their going. The abbot thus pressed from behind, and stumbling over his own drapery before, fell suddenly prostrate in the doorway that connected the chapel with the abbey, and was instantly buried under a pyramid of ghostly carcasses, that fell over him and each other, and lay a rolling chaos of animated rotundities, sprawling and brawling in unseemly disarray, and sending forth the names of all the saints in and out of heaven, amidst the clashing of swords, the ringing of bucklers, the clattering of helmets, the twanging of bow-strings, the whizzing of arrows, the screams of women, the shouts of the warriors and the vociferations of the peasantry, who had been assembled to the intended nuptials, and who seeing a fair set-to, contrived to pick a quarrel among themselves on the occasion, and proceeded with staff and cudgel, to crack each other's skulls for the good of the king and the earl.

So Robert Fitz-Ooth, Earl of Locksley and Huntingdon, is forced to take to the forest with his yeomen to become Robin Hood. His bride-to-be, Matilda Fitzwater, joins him and is renamed Maid Marian.

The only friar who did not flee at the wedding was Brother Michael. He took in all the action without undue alarm. Afterwards he speaks with the rest of his brethren about it. He seems to defend Robin and his ways. Here also he makes up a verse to suit the occasion.

In the morning Michael and another monk agree to lead Ralph Montfaucon, the leader of Henry's forces, to Arlingford Castle under the plausible pretext of giving the baron an explanation of his intervention at the nuptials. Actually Ralph is interested in seeing more of Matilda. Upon his arrival at Arlingford Castle, Ralph finds things

⁶Ibid., pp. 175; 6.

in an unsettled state. The news has preceded them that the king's men have taken Robert Fitz-Ooth's castle and lands. The baron, being a practical man, has decided to throw his forces in on the side of King Henry. He has also tried to persuade his daughter to do the same. In this attempt he has failed, to his complete consternation. Having passed a supperless and sleepless night, the baron is breaking his fast when he receives Sir Ralph and his party. The party is bade to join the feast and complies. After refreshing themselves, Sir Ralph offers his apologies for and an explanation of what happened on the preceding day.

During the interview with Ralph, Matilda, unaware of the visitors, enters the room garbed in a dress of green with a small quiver of arrows by her side and a bow in her hand. Questioning her, the baron finds that she intends to go hunting. The baron allows that she is going to meet Robert, but she denies it. He then refuses to allow her to go.

She replies that if she is kept cooped up in this odious castle, she shall pine and die like a lonely swan on a pool; but her father is adamant. Matilda takes her leave after asking the friar (Brother Michael) to come again on the morrow and hear her confession. He says he will and then departs with the knight.

King Henry is quite upset when he discovers that Robert Fitz-Ooth has not been captured. He declares that he will give the lands of Robert Fitz-Ooth to the person

who would bring in the earl. Hereupon Ralph Montfaucon decides to try for the prize. His object is to win Matilda for his own for she is now in possession of his heart. Reasoning that the way to possess her might lie through her father, who still retained his love for the lands and castle of Locksley, and that these lands were worth winning in themselves, Ralph enters the fray. Choosing a band of followers, he scours the countryside for Robert, but to no avail. Since his men are "paid with the wages of hope,"⁷ they begin to fall away. Ralph is left with only his squire. Still he finds no trace of his prize. Autumn and winter pass and one spring day Ralph finds himself at Gamwell Hall during the time of the May games.

After enjoying the famous Gamwell hospitality, Ralph accompanies them to the games. At the games Ralph recognizes Matilda, who is queen of the May. Hereupon Ralph also discovers that Robert Fitz-Ooth is present under the name of Robin Hood. He leaves to recruit a force to help him take Robin. Riding several miles, he comes to Nottingham, where he gathers a force consisting of the sheriff and his men. While they are returning to the scene Ralph has just left, the sheriff tells Ralph of the activities of Robin Hood and his band of "disinherited prodigals, outlawed debtors, excommunicated heretics, elder sons that have spent all they had, and younger sons that never had anything to spend."⁸ With these men, the

⁷Ibid., 199.

⁸Ibid., 205.

sheriff informs Ralph, Robin kills the king's deer and plunders wealthy travelers, especially abbots and bishops. This villain, proclaims the sheriff,

perverts the deluded people by making them believe that those who tithe and toll upon them for their spiritual and temporal benefit are not their best friends and fatherly guardian; for he holds that in giving to boors and old women what he takes from priests and peers, he does but restore to the former what the latter has taken from them; and this the impudent varlet calls distributive justice.⁹

The sheriff, Ralph and the posse draw near to the area where Robin and his men are and see a party approaching. The party consists of Lady Matilda, friar Michael, young Gamwell, Robin and about a half dozen foresters. When the parties have drawn near to one another, the sheriff and Ralph call upon the company to deliver up the traitor Robert, formerly Earl of Huntingdon. Robin makes answer by letting fly an arrow that strikes the ground between the forefeet of the sheriff's horse, causing it to rear up and dislodge the sheriff in the dust. Matilda shoots Montfaucon in the arm. The sheriff is reseated by his men and leads the charge. Several of his men are struck down by arrows, and he himself is dislodged by friar Michael wielding an eight-foot staff. Robin's men soon put the sheriff's to flight. Sir Ralph's squire attends him, but Matilda herself comes forward to extract the arrow from his arm. She remarks that she could easily have put this arrow into his heart; whereupon, Ralph says that she has already lodged one there. Matilda replies that if he

⁹Ibid., 206.

really loves her, he should show it by not interfering with her love, Robin, and then she could at least show him her gratitude.

Up until this time Matilda has convinced her father, the baron, that she should be allowed to range at liberty, provided she always returned home. As a result of the preceding episode, a party of king's men is sent to arrest Matilda, friar Michael and William Gamwell. Consequently, Matilda's father learns of her escapades, friar Michael's brethren hold a chapter and sentence him to seven years' privation of wine, and William Gamwell is sentenced to be hanged at Nottingham. These actions lead to further developments. Matilda is imprisoned in Arlingford Castle by her father; friar Michael becomes angry at his sentence and decides to depart from the abbey, which his brothers try to prohibit, receiving many whacks of his staff for their efforts; and William Gamwell is rescued with the help of Robin and his companions, assisted by the Gamwells.

Prince John now enters the picture. He has ascended to power during the absence of his brother Richard Coeur-de-Lion, who has gone on a crusade. John becomes enamored of Matilda and besieges Arlingford Castle. Matilda is saved by the merry men of Sherwood Forest, and she and her father and his retainers flee to Sherwood. The band is growing rather rapidly. Young Gamwell has become Scarlet; his page has become Little John; Father Michael, formerly of Rubygill Abbey, is now

Friar Tuck of Sherwood Forest; and Matilda, of course, is Maid Marian. Friar Tuck now unites Robin Hood and Maid Marian, and the forest rings with the revels of the wedding feast.

Thus the new society of Sherwood Forest is formed. The rest of this prose tale deals with several other adventures of the merry company. As Peacock states it:

So Robin and Marian dwelt and reigned in the forest, ranging the glades, and the green wood from the matins of the lark to the vespers of the nightingale and administrating natural justice according to Robin's ideas of rectifying the inequalities of human condition; raising genial dews from the bags of the rich and idle, and returning them in fertilizing showers on the poor and industrious:....¹⁰

Some biographical information about the author of Maid Marian is illuminating, since the influence of his life upon his writings is easily seen.

Thomas Love Peacock was born on October 18, 1785. His father was a glass merchant. Peacock could not have known him very well, as he was taken by his mother to the home of her father, Captain Thomas Love, at the age of three. Captain Love was a naval officer who had lost one leg in a naval battle. Peacock liked his grandfather and listened to his tales of the sea by the hour. His grandfather seems to have "spent his pension merrily, planting his garden, drinking grog, singing sea chanties and recalling his adventures."¹¹ His passion for the sea does not seem to have rubbed off on Peacock, however.

¹⁰Ibid., 258.

¹¹Olwen W. Campbell, Thomas Love Peacock (New York: Roy Publishers, 1953), p. 13.

At twenty-three Peacock went to sea for a year. He later described his ship as a floating inferno where writing poetry or doing any rational thing was a moral impossibility.¹² He may have gained some technical knowledge of ships which was valuable later in his work at the India House.

It was from his mother, however, that he inherited his scholarly and literary interests. Sarah Peacock was a great reader of history, especially Gibbon's The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. In choosing the Robin Hood material, Peacock shows the influence of his mother's love of history.

Peacock grew up in a household of adults at Gogmoor Hall. Gogmoor Hall was set in a beautiful area - wooded hills, a deep river, pastures, and trim lawns. While he was living there, he attended school at Englefield Green. Here he acquired some knowledge of Greek, Latin, and French.¹³ This happy environment formed the two passions that continually vied with each other throughout his life. He had a love for country air and scenes, and he also had an interest in the classics and Greek that he shared later with Shelley during their long friendship. Peacock's love for the outdoors is apparent in the setting for Maid Marian.

There was another effect arising out of his youthful.

¹²Ibid.

¹³J. B. Priestley, Thomas Love Peacock (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1927), p. 56.

environment. He was necessarily very close to his mother. He shared her scholarly and literary interests. Later in life he was always closer to women than to men. His attraction toward them, however, was usually on the basis of affection and intellectual comradeship. This carried over into his novels. The women in them are usually well educated, independent women with minds of their own. They are quite different from women in other works of the time (cf. Lord Byron's Don Juan). In Maid Marian Peacock changes the character of Maid Marian radically. Ritson speaks of maid Marian who appears to have been Robin Hood's concubine.¹⁴ In Peacock's novel, however, she is chaste until after her marriage to Robin when "the appellation was then as much a misnomer as that of Little John."¹⁵

Peacock did fall passionately in love at the age of twenty-two. He was engaged, but after a few months some misunderstanding arose and the engagement was broken off. Peacock did not marry until twelve years later. He met the girl he was to marry on a trip to Wales in 1810. He described Jane Griffydh after this trip as his lovely friend and Carnaervonshire nymph who pleased him by talking of Scipio and Hannibal and the Emperor Otho.¹⁶ He was evidently at this period trying to evade emotional entanglements, and he was also preoccupied with seeking

¹⁴Joseph Ritson (ed.), Robin Hood (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1884), p. 28.

¹⁵Peacock, 268-68. ¹⁶Campbell, 22.22.

to become a successful author. He first tried writing poetry but was unsuccessful.

In 1812 Peacock met Shelley. They soon became fast friends. They shared many interests - a dislike of the fickleness, folly, and drunkenness of the Welsh; and atheism. Their association was close from 1813 to the time of Shelley's death. Shelley sought Peacock's counsel in some of the worst crises in his life. "The longest and best of the letters he wrote from Italy was addressed to Peacock."¹⁷

In 1815 Peacock wrote his first novel, Headlong Hall. In this work he set a pattern that he followed rather faithfully in his other works. The plot is concerned with the gathering of people to a banquet to talk. The setting is romantic. The characters are types. There are the usual "minor and major cranks, the extraordinary theories, the conversational climaxes, the ludicrous physical accidents; one or two lovely ladies and a good deal of mountain scenery - and already mature, the exquisite pointed and rhythmical prose, and undefinable wittiness in the intonation and order of words."¹⁸

Headlong Hall was published anonymously late in 1815. It was an immediate success. "Shelley regarded it as Peacock's best tale, and was never tired of singing its praises."¹⁹

Peacock continued to write novels in this same pattern

¹⁷Ibid., 25. ¹⁸Ibid., 34. ¹⁹Priestley, 35.

and vein until 1822. In 1822 Maid Marian was published. In Maid Marian and his following work The Misfortunes of Elphin Peacock turned to historical romance. He was possibly searching for a satiric medium with more of a plot than his earlier discussion books.

It is not difficult to see why the Robin Hood material appealed to Peacock. There is the setting; romantic and idyllic, appealing to his love of the out-of-doors. In addition, the material was poetry. Since his first love was poetry, here was an opportunity to deal with it, and these ballads would lend themselves rather readily to his prose treatment. Also, the elements of the ridiculous and the farcical are here. On the other hand, there is a serious side to the material. It is almost serious enough to be considered the raw material for an English epic. It is not as elevated as the Arthurian material, but kings and rulers do enter into the picture (Henry, Richard and Prince John). Joseph Ritson observes that a veneration for Robin Hood appeared after his death.

A festival and solemn games were instituted in honour of his memory, which were celebrated till the latter end of the sixteenth century; not by the populace only, but by kings and princes and grave magistrates; and that as well in Scotland as in England; being considered in the former country, of the highest political importance, and essential to the civil and religious liberties of the people,.....²⁰

Then there are the characters. It is not too surprising on reflection about his relationships with women that the

²⁰Ritson, 10.

main character in his retelling of the ballads is a woman, Maid Marian. She is not the typical heroine of the day, but Peacock is not the typical prose writer of the day either. She has "beauty, grace, wit, sense, discretion, dexterity, learning, and valour,"²¹ according to Brother Michael; and Peacock goes so far as to have her hold her own in battle against King Richard himself. Peacock greatly enlarges Maid Marian's activity. In the early ballads she does not appear. "Who or whatever this lady was, it is observable that no mention of her occurs either in Lytell geste of Robyn Hode, or in any other poem or song concerning him, except the very old ballad of 'Robin Hoods golden prise' where she is barely named, and a still more modern one of no merit..."²² The more modern reference was to her as the queen of the May which Peacock uses. Friar Tuck, the other main character, would seem to be a made-to-order Peacock figure. The clerics in his other novels with few exceptions were more interested in food and drink than in spiritual matters. Brother Michael is no exception.

Thus this material must have seemed the perfect vehicle to Peacock to carry his satire. First there was the opportunity for criticism of the foibles of both religious and political figures. This is how he sketches in the historical background:

The departure of King Richard from England was

²¹Peacock, 178. ²²Ritson, 27.

succeeded by the episcopal regency of the bishops of Ely and Durham. Longchamp, bishop of Ely, proceeded to show his sense of Christian fellowship by arresting his brother bishop, and despoiling him of his share in the government; and to set forth his humility and loving-kindness in a retinue of nobles and knights who consumed in one night's entertainment some five years' revenue of their entertainer, and in a guard of fifteen hundred foreign soldiers, whom he considered indispensable to the exercise of a vigour beyond the law in maintaining wholesome discipline over the refractory English. The ignorant impatience of the swinish multitude with these fruits of good living, brought forth by one of the meek who had inherited the earth, displayed itself in a general ferment, of which Prince John took advantage to make the experiment of getting possession of his brother's crown in his absence. He began by calling at Reading a council of barons, whose aspect induced the holy bishop to disguise himself (some say as an old woman, which in the twelfth century, perhaps might have been a disguise for a bishop), and make his escape beyond the sea....²³

He talks of the use of political power in describing Robin Hood's leadership in Sherwood through the mouth of Friar Tuck:

...Robin Hood is king of the forest both by dignity of birth and by virtue of his standing army; to say nothing of the free choice of his people, which he has indeed, but I pass it by as an illegitimate basis of power. He holds his dominion over the forest, and its horned multitude of citizen deer, and its swinish multitude or peasantry of wild boars, by right of conquest and force of arms. He levies contributions among them by the free consent of his archers, their virtual representatives. If they should find a voice to complain that we are tyrants and usurpers to kill and cook them up in their assigned and native dwelling-place, we should most convincingly admonish them, with point of arrow, that they have nothing to do with our laws but to obey them. Is it not written that the fat ribs of the herd shall be fed upon by the mighty of the land? And have they not withal my blessing? my orthodox, canonical, and archepiscopal blessing? Do I not give thanks for them when they are well roasted and smoking under my nose? What title had William of Normandy to England that Robin of Locksley has not to merry Sherwood? William fought for his claim. So does Robin. With whom, both? With any that would or will dispute it. William raised contributions. So does Robin. From whom, both? From all that they could or can make pay them. Why did they

²³ Peacock, 219.

that they could or can make pay them. Why did they pay them to William? Why do any pay them to Robin? For the same reason to both; because they could not or cannot help it. They differ indeed, in this, that William took from the poor and gave to the rich, and Robin takes from the rich and gives to the poor: and therein is Robin illegitimate; though in all else he is true prince....²⁴

Peacock satirizes the clergy further in the figure of Friar Tuck. His love of wine was immoderate, as demonstrated by his brother friars' treatment of him when they wished to punish him. They proposed to take away his wine for a period of seven years. Also, at the conclusion of the famous quarterstaff battle between Robin in disguise and himself, which Friar Tuck won, he offers a flask of canary to Robin as "a balm for all bruises, outward and inward."²⁵ There is even some question about his celibacy. After the preceding incident when Marian and Robin are spending the evening with him, Friar Tuck was called out at midnight by a long plaintive musical cry. He tries to make excuse by conjuring up a tale which he sang of a spirit of a maiden who drowned in the river. After he has finished, Marian sings a tale of her own about a friar of Rubygill who kept his vow of chastity very ill. Thereupon the friar blushes, blaming it on the canary. Friar Tuck is also enlarged upon. He is made a compilation of several other figures from the Robin Hood material. In the original ballads the quarterstaff battle took place between Little John and Robin Hood. Since Peacock had dealt with clergymen at some length in his previous novels,

²⁴Ibid., 226. ²⁵Ibid., 254.

the character of Friar Tuck probably presented itself to him with appeal enough so that he readily developed Friar Tuck into a many-faceted and engrossing character.

The structure of Peacock's novel is hardly in the main stream of the literary development of the novel. It is obvious that Peacock is laughing at the novel at the same time that he uses it. He does owe a debt to Fielding, according to J. B. Priestley, for he has "caught Fielding's trick of describing some piece of horseplay and buffoonery not only quite gravely but also in a slightly heightened manner as if it were an epic."²⁶ Priestley also calls attention to Peacock's belief, set forth in his article for the London Review on French Comic Romances, that all the great writers of comic fiction, Aristophanes, Petronius, Rabelais, and Voltaire, had always put opinion before character in their works and had dealt with ideas rather than with human beings.²⁷ Peacock certainly does this and in so doing is close to flouting the conventions of the fiction of his day.

Peacock makes little attempt in Maid Marian to criticize the manners of the time. This is in contrast with his five novels of talk which are not attempts at historical romance.

In the last analysis, however, it can be argued that Peacock is not actually a satirist. Satire is defined by Thrall and Hibbard as "a literary manner which

²⁶Priestley, 132. ²⁷Ibid., 133.

blends a critical attitude with humor and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved."²⁸

Peacock is indeed critical of humans and their institutions. What can be questioned are his motives. Did he intend to improve human institutions or humanity? His own political, religious, literary and social views are hard to pinpoint. Priestley mentions that "Peacock is not a political satirist in the ordinary sense at all. He had not the usual desire to discredit one system or party and so indirectly exalt another."²⁹ He was both Radical and Tory negatively (he criticized both sides in his works). He holds things up to ridicule, but possibly not for any other purpose than to have fun at their expense. Priestley maintains that this is where many of his critics have gone awry; that Peacock was a humorist, not a satirist. It is not his satire, but his humor which has kept him alive. Shelley said of Peacock

His fine wit
Makes such a wound, the knife is lost in it.
As strain too learned for a shallow age,
Too wise for selfish bigots; let his page
Which claims the chosen spirits of his time,
Fold itself up for a serener clime
Of years to come and find its recompense
In that just expectation.³⁰

It is the absence of a neat wound that marks Peacock's writings, and makes him a humorist rather than a satirist. Peacock's beliefs are held by some characters in all of his books, but are possibly best summed up in *Friar Tuck*. *Friar Tuck* believes in good food, good wine,

²⁸Thrall, 436. ²⁹Priestley, 196. ³⁰Ibid., 200, 1.

good fellowship and good talk. He sums up his attitude toward life following the incident of the woman at midnight by saying,

...you are welcome to laugh if it so please you. None shall laugh in my company, though it be at my expense, but I will have my share of the merriment. The world is a stage, and life is a farce, and he that laughs most has most profit of the performance. The worst thing is good enough to be laughed at, though it be good for nothing else; and the best thing, though it be good for something else, is good for nothing better.

And he struck up a song in praise of laughing, and quaffing....³¹

³¹Peacock, 258.

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