

COMMUNICATION

Revisiting the Origins of the ‘Roundhead’ in 1641

Lloyd Bowen 

Department of History, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

Email: bowenL@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

This article revisits the contested origins of the political label ‘Roundhead’ during the English Revolution, challenging the conventional view that the term originated spontaneously during the Westminster tumults of December 1641. While historians have generally relied upon John Rushworth’s later account of David Hyde denouncing parliamentary crowds as ‘round-headed dogs’, this study demonstrates that the contemporary evidence is more ambiguous. It explores alternative formulations, particularly Hyde’s reported insult ‘Ram-headed rogues’, and situates both terms within a wider culture of anti-Puritan satire, theatrical caricature, and political mockery. Drawing upon pamphlets, dramatic literature, manuscript annotations, and print culture, the article argues that ‘Roundhead’ may already have circulated before December 1641, notably in Richard Brathwaite’s *Mercurius Britannicus*. The article therefore proposes a more complex genealogy for the term, showing how political identities emerged through the interaction of print, performance, satire, and popular mobilization rather than through a single moment of invention.

Historians have long agreed that the Civil War party labels ‘Cavalier’ and ‘Roundhead’ emerged during the Westminster tumults of December 1641, the so-called ‘December Days’. These were the paired nicknames through which the rival allegiances of the wars that engulfed England after 1642 became, and have remained, popularly known: ‘Cavalier’, from the French and Spanish terms for a horseman, conjured the swaggering and dissolute swordsman in arms for Charles I, while ‘Roundhead’ derided the supporters of Parliament by evoking the close-cropped hair associated with London apprentices as well as their supposed Puritan zeal. Both began as terms of abuse and gradually hardened into designations of party allegiance during the early course of the conflict. The disturbances surrounding the appointment of Sir Thomas Lunsford as Lieutenant of the Tower of London, together with the increasingly heated agitation over episcopacy, produced a febrile political atmosphere in which London apprentices and citizens gathered in huge numbers around Parliament from 27 December 1641, demanding reform and redress of their grievances. These confrontations have generally been recognized as the moment at which both terms entered English political discourse as ‘party’ labels.

Yet while the appearance of ‘Cavalier’ in contemporary sources is secure,¹ the evidential basis for the emergence of ‘Roundhead’ is markedly less stable. The term is usually traced to the reported outburst of the reformado soldier David Hyde, who supposedly threatened to kill the ‘round-headed dogs’ protesting against the bishops.² But we need to acknowledge that this formulation derives principally from retrospective testimony, especially the later recollections of a parliamentary assistant clerk, John Rushworth. Contemporary reports are much less certain, and one important source instead records Hyde denouncing the crowd as ‘Ram-headed rogues’. This communication argues that the conventional story of the ‘Roundhead’s’ origin requires reconsideration. It suggests, first, that the term may have circulated before the Westminster clashes of December 1641; second, that the semantic relationship between ‘Roundhead’, ‘Ram-head’, and associated anti-Puritan insults has not been sufficiently appreciated; and third, that the theatrical and satirical culture of 1641 provides an important context for understanding the emergence of the label. Although the case examined here is specific in time and place, the questions it raises travel well beyond its immediate context. How political insults are coined and become the names of ‘parties’, and how later chroniclers tidy messy linguistic beginnings into satisfying stories of origin, are problems familiar to historians of political language, partisanship, and identity formation in any period; the ‘Roundhead’ offers an unusually well-documented opportunity to examine such processes at work.

I

The wider political context of the ‘December Days’ has been carefully reconstructed by historians of the outbreak of the Civil War.³ During the closing months of 1641 the Long Parliament and Charles I faced a convergence of crises: the Irish rebellion, escalating fears of ‘popery’, bitter disputes over episcopacy, and mounting mutual distrust. Political mobilization within London intensified dramatically in response.⁴ Citizens petitioned Parliament in unprecedented numbers, apprentices crowded Westminster, pamphlets flooded the capital and the talk on the streets and in the taverns had become increasingly heated, partisan, and confrontational. The atmosphere was simultaneously theatrical and volatile, with rumour, print, and public

¹This is to say that Lunsford, Hyde, their associates and their royalist descendants were described in the topical literature as ‘Cavaliers’; this term had been associated with the king’s forces since 1639 and had been in circulation since the sixteenth century.

²For Hyde, see C. D. Gilbert, ‘The image of the “Cavalier”: David Hyde and a disorderly banquet in 1643 Worcester’, *Midland History*, 42 (2017), pp. 233–42.

³The fullest treatment of the ‘December Days’ remains Brian Manning, *The English people and the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 84–113, but all histories of the outbreak of the Civil War give attention to these tumults. See especially S. R. Gardiner, *History of England from the accession of James I, to the outbreak of the Civil War, 1603–1642* (London, 1883), X, pp. 107–28; Anthony Fletcher, *The outbreak of the English Civil War* (London, 1981), pp. 170–80; Conrad Russell, *The fall of the British monarchies, 1637–1642* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 400–53; Keith Lindley, *Popular politics and religion in Civil War London* (London, 1997), pp. 98–117; David Cressy, *England on edge: crisis and revolution, 1640–1642* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 379–95.

⁴On this theme, see John Walter, *Covenanting citizens: the protestation oath and popular political culture in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2016); Jordan S. Downs, *Civil War London: mobilizing for parliament, 1641–5* (Manchester, 2021).

demonstration feeding one another in an unprecedented manner.⁵ The appointment of Sir Thomas Lunsford as Lieutenant of the Tower of London sharpened these anxieties considerably as an individual who already possessed a formidable public reputation for violence and disorder.⁶ Parliamentary leaders and their London supporters interpreted his elevation as evidence that the king intended some kind of coercive move against Parliament and the City, and it was within this atmosphere of mutual provocation that the labels 'Cavalier' and 'Roundhead' emerged.

Eyewitnesses and near contemporaries consistently associated the birth of the Civil War's key political nicknames with the Westminster tumults of this period – particularly the confrontations of 27 December. William Lilly, who claimed to have been present, later recalled that many of the citizens who flocked to Westminster wore their hair 'very few of them longer than their eares', so that those who attended Parliament 'were by a nickname called Round-heads'.⁷ Parliamentary pamphlets written during the opening phase of the Civil War similarly remembered these disturbances as the context in which the term first acquired its political currency. A tract printed in July 1642 observed that 'the name of Roundhead was invented by some maligner of parliamentary priviledges' at this time, while another parliamentary writer recalled that 'if any honest men ... went to Westminster [in December 1641] to countenance the Parliament or to guard them in their way, they should ... receive the termes of Round-heads'.⁸ Such accounts established a durable historical memory in which the name arose spontaneously amidst the clamour of the streets. By the later seventeenth century the anecdote had acquired near canonical status, repeated in memoirs and historical compilations as the obvious moment of origin for the parliamentarian nickname.

The most influential version of this story came from John Rushworth's *Historical Collections*. Rushworth presented himself as a dispassionate eyewitness to the political crisis, emphasizing his commitment to preserving 'a bare narrative of matter of fact digested in order of time'.⁹ In his account of the 'December Days' he recalled David Hyde confronting the Westminster crowds and declaring that he would 'cut the throats of those round-headed dogs that bawled against bishops, which passionate expressions of his, as far as I could ever learn, was the first miniting of that term or compellation of *Round-heads*, which afterwards grew so general'.¹⁰ Historians have understandably relied upon Rushworth because of his proximity to events and because his *Historical Collections* became one of the foundational documentary sources for the outbreak of the Civil War. Yet Rushworth's wording contains important qualifications. His account was retrospective, composed years after the events in question, and the phrase 'as far as I could ever learn' indicates that even he was not entirely certain about the genealogy he was recording. This hesitation matters

⁵The richest analysis of these processes is Cressy, *England on edge*.

⁶On Lunsford, see Mark Stoyle, 'The cannibal Cavalier: Sir Thomas Lunsford and the fashioning of the Cavalier archetype', *Historical Journal*, 59 (2016), pp. 293–317.

⁷William Lilly, *Monarchy, or no monarchy* (London, 1651), pp. 106–7.

⁸*The round-head uncovered* (London, 1642), p. 8; W. L., *Medicine for malignancy* (London, 1644), p. 27.

⁹John Rushworth, *Historical collections* (London, 1721), I, pp. xi–xiii.

¹⁰Rushworth, *Historical collections*, IV, p. 463.

because it reveals that the origin story was already unstable within living memory of the events themselves. It is also worth noting Rushworth's use of the gerund 'miniting' here. Historians have generally glossed this as a misspelling or misprint of 'minting', to mean 'creating' or 'inventing'. However, such usage would itself be a novelty, being only recorded by the *OED* as operating in this manner after c.1643. It is possible that Rushworth in fact used 'minuting' deliberately and to mean 'entering the record', which might possibly suggest that he was referring to a term that possessed an earlier history but which was only on this occasion being deployed against parliament's supporters.

Closer inspection of Rushworth's sources complicates the matter further. Much of his narrative of the Westminster tumults was assembled from contemporary newsbooks, and in this instance he relied on the first issue of the short-lived *Diurnall Occurrences in Parliament*. Rushworth's heavily annotated copy of this issue survives in the Bodleian Library and contains his marginal note, partly shorthand, identifying the anonymous aggressor as 'Davy Hide, whence came the name of roundhead'.¹¹ Yet the printed text from which he worked does not contain the word 'Roundhead' at all. It merely reports that one of the Cavaliers drew his sword and threatened 'to cut the throats of them that cried out against the Bishops'.¹² The crucial term therefore appears not in the contemporary report, but only in Rushworth's later annotation. This distinction matters because modern historians have often treated Rushworth's recollection as though it were contemporaneous evidence, when in fact it reflects an act of retrospective interpretation. Rushworth's own archival practices thus expose the layered process through which later historical memory was constructed out of fragmentary contemporary materials.

Rushworth's account also reflects a broader tendency within later seventeenth-century historiography to stabilize the origins of Civil War political language. By the later Stuart period 'Roundhead' and 'Cavalier' had acquired a retrospective coherence as party identities extending beyond the immediate crisis of the 1640s. Historians and memoirists therefore possessed a natural incentive to identify dramatic scenes of origin. The image of Hyde drawing his sword amidst the Westminster crowd offered a vivid anecdote capable of encapsulating the emergence of political division. Yet the very neatness of this story may obscure the more diffuse realities of linguistic change. Political nicknames rarely emerge instantaneously, but rather accumulate through repeated acts of circulation, adaptation, and reinterpretation across speech, print, and performance. The evidence surrounding 'Roundhead' conforms more closely to this accretive process than to the legend of a single moment of invention.

An important account of events compiled by an individual closely involved in the December disturbances survives in a pamphlet entitled *A True Relation of the Most Wise and Worthy Speech made by Captain Ven*. The tract recounted a speech delivered on 29 December 1641 by the London MP John Venn to apprentices who had gathered

¹¹Bodleian Library, Arch. H. e.108(3).

¹²*Diurnall occurrences in parliament from 27 of December to 2d Januarie 1641[2]* (London, 1642), 2. Cf. John Vicars, *Jovah jireh, or, God in the mount* (London, 1644), p. 66; British Library, 669, f.4(42): *The humble petition of the major, aldermen; and common councill of the City of London* (London, 1642); *The vindication of parliament* (London, 1642), pp. 10–11.

after some of their number who had been involved in the earlier crowd agitation were imprisoned by the Lord Mayor at The Counter in Wood Street. Venn was deeply associated with the politics of the London apprentices and he (and his wife) had even been accused of encouraging the recent tumults.¹³ In describing the disturbances of 27 December, Venn reported that Hyde and his associates had abused the crowd 'with base language', and that Hyde had called the apprentices 'Ram-headed rogues'.¹⁴ This wording is highly significant. 'Ram-head' was already an established insult associated with cuckoldry, emasculation, and ridicule. The term circulated widely in early Stuart literary culture, appearing in drama, satirical pamphlets, jest-books, and even defamatory speech.¹⁵ In 1637, for example, a London woman alleged that a neighbour had denounced her master as a 'Ramhead and Bulhead and cuckold and pimpe'.¹⁶ The image of horns and the figure of the cuckold also occupied an important place within the traditions of anti-Puritan satire,¹⁷ which regularly portrayed godly men as sexually inadequate husbands, tyrannical patriarchs, or ridiculous hypocrites incapable of governing either households or commonwealths. Such insults fused sexual humiliation with social disorder, and Puritans were especially frequently mocked through images of cuckoldry and emasculation, an association sharpened by royalist polemic in the unstable atmosphere of 1641. 'Ram-head' thus formed part of a familiar comic vocabulary through which anti-Puritan hostility could be expressed, and the insult worked because it condensed a range of assumptions about honour, masculinity, sexuality, and social authority into a single memorable image. The language reported in this near-contemporary text therefore belonged to an existing polemical vocabulary rather than representing a new political invention. It also raises the possibility that later recollections or usages transformed or regularized the insult into the more familiar 'Roundhead'; there is even the possibility, of course, that 'Roundhead' was a mishearing of 'Ram-head'.

One especially important witness to this vocabulary was John Taylor, the Water Poet, perhaps the most prolific royalist propagandist of the early 1640s.¹⁸ Years before, however, in *Taylor's Pastorall* (1624) he had elaborated a series of comic etymological games around the figure of the 'Ramhead'. Discussing the zodiacal sign of Aries, Taylor remarked that 'the Ram doth rule the head/Then are their judgments foolish, fond and base,/That take the name of *Ramhead* in disgrace'.¹⁹ The joke depended upon a dense network of associations linking horns, folly, sexuality, and ridicule. Taylor's earlier interest in the term matters because he would later become

¹³'Note of evidence against Captain Venn', Bodleian Library, Clarendon MS 20, fo. 129; Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, ed. W. D. Macray (Oxford, 1883), I, p. 455.

¹⁴*A true relation of the most wise and worthy speech made by Captain Ven* (London, 1641), p. 1.

¹⁵Thomas Middleton, *A trick to catch the Old One* (London, 1608), sig. G3; Thomas Dekker, *The ravens almanacke* (London, 1609), sig. B1v; *The owles almanacke ... 1618* (London, 1618), p. 9; Philip Massinger and Nathan Field, *The fatall dowry* (London, 1632), sig. Dv; *A Christian turn'd Turke* (London, 1628), np.

¹⁶London consistory court deposition books, *Raiding con Jourdain*, deposition of Mary Wood, 1637, The London Archives, DL/C/0234.

¹⁷William P. Holden, *Anti-Puritan satire, 1572-1642* (New Haven, CT, 1954); Nicola Jane Pearce, 'Cuckoldry and cornution in seventeenth century English political discourse' (PhD thesis, Hull, 2019), pp. 62-120; Samuel Fullerton, *Sexual politics in revolutionary England* (Manchester, 2024), pp. 29-68.

¹⁸For Taylor, see Bernard Capp, *The world of John Taylor, the water poet, 1578-1653* (Oxford, 1994).

¹⁹John Taylor, *Taylor's pastorall* (London, 1624), sigs. C4v-D1v.

one of the chief popularizers of the ‘Roundhead’ label in 1642, but also because he revived his use of ‘Ram-head’ at this time. The lexical proximity between ‘Ram-head’ and ‘Roundhead’ was therefore not accidental as both terms belonged to the same satirical universe and drew upon similar assumptions about social inversion, ridicule, and anti-Puritan caricature.

II

In addition to these ambiguities surrounding Hyde’s intervention, there is also evidence that ‘Roundhead’ may have circulated *before* the Westminster tumults. The evidence for this emerges from the poet, dramatist, and writer on the nature of English gentility, Richard Brathwaite, who produced a neglected political playlet, *Mercurius Britannicus*, in 1641.²⁰ The text has received no attention from historians, although the literary scholar Martin Butler provided an important treatment of the work more than four decades ago.²¹ Brathwaite’s play pamphlet was originally produced in Latin, and it dramatized recent political controversies surrounding ship money and religious reform. Butler’s research suggested that the Latin version may have been performed under the patronage of the Earl of Leicester in Paris, as later versions of the text claimed. The text was translated into English and appears to have circulated in London by the summer of 1641. George Thomason’s copy was gathered in a volume of tracts dated between July and September of that year, indicating that the work had entered metropolitan print culture several months before the ‘December Days’.²²

The play text thinly dramatized recent political events, focusing particularly upon the Ship Money trial of John Hampden and the Long Parliament’s censuring of the judges who had found against him. It was far from a radical production, however, and was sharply satirical about parliamentary efforts toward reform of the Church. In the text’s ‘Act Four’, Brathwaite introduces a ‘Chorus of Common People’, a version of a crowd of London apprentices, perhaps of the kind who had lobbied for the execution of the Earl of Strafford in May 1641, another of the playlet’s subjects. The leader of this ‘flocke’ is ‘Master Prinrer’, ‘the oracle of our conventicle’: a transparent caricature of William Prynne, the parliamentarian ‘martyr’ whose mutilated ears (for his anti-theatrical diatribe *Histrionmastix*) had become emblematic of godly suffering under Charles I.²³ Brathwaite’s satire therefore fused theatrical caricature with immediate political recognizability.

²⁰Julie Sanders, ‘Brathwaite, Richard (1587/8–1673)’, *ODNB*.

²¹Martin Butler, ‘A case study in Caroline political theatre: Richard Brathwaite’s “*Mercurius Britannicus*” (1641)’, *Historical Journal*, 27 (1984), pp. 947–53. The text and its contemporary parallels to the Ship Money case and Strafford’s trial were first described in Joseph Quincy Adams, jr, ‘Richard Brathwaite’s *Mercurius Britannicus*’, *Modern Language Notes*, 26 (1911), pp. 233–5; see also Matthew Wilson Black, *Richard Brathwaite: an account of his life and works* (Philadelphia, PA, 1928), pp. 75–8. *Britannicus* is noticed but not discussed in depth in the literary scholar Susan Wiseman’s important analyses of the pamphlet play genre: ‘Pamphlet plays in the Civil War news market: genre, politics, and “context”’, *Prose Studies*, 21 (1998), pp. 66–83, at pp. 70, 81, n. 11; *Drama and politics in the English Civil War* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 22, 34–5. The work merits no mention in Heidi Craig’s recent *Theatre closure and the paradoxical rise of English Renaissance drama in the civil wars* (Cambridge, 2023).

²²Richard Brathwaite, *Mercurius Britannicus* (London, 1641): British Library, E.172 (34).

²³Brathwaite, *Mercurius Britannicus*, sig. D4.

In the playlet Prinner outlines sweeping plans for ecclesiastical reform, including the removal of church ceremonies, the abolition of the Book of Common Prayer, and the levelling of ecclesiastical hierarchies. At this point another character, Democritus, exclaims: 'Lord, with what pricked up eares these round heads harken to their oratour Prinner.'²⁴ Another edition renders the line slightly differently as 'these notted and round heads with their prick eares'. This appears to be the earliest surviving use of 'round heads' as a collective political noun in English. Equally significant is the semantic environment in which the phrase appears. 'Round heads' are linked directly with 'pricked up eares', another anti-Puritan insult that would become politically resonant during the Civil War. Brathwaite therefore demonstrates that the vocabulary associated with the future parliamentary stereotype was already available months before Hyde supposedly coined the term at Westminster. The reference to 'pricked up eares' evokes the exposed ears of men with cropped hair, but it also recalled Prynne's own mutilated ears. Elsewhere in the playlet Brathwaite mocked the 'new city fashion' of short hair associated with London apprentices. This was a pointed topical reference, as in June 1640 the London Court of Aldermen had ruled that no apprentice would receive his freedom unless he presented himself with his hair cut 'in a decent and comely manner'.²⁵ The regulation effectively institutionalized the short hairstyle that royalists would come to identify readily with radical urban Puritanism. Brathwaite therefore demonstrates that the visual stereotype, and possibly even the label itself, already existed before December 1641. The political resonance of the term in the 'December Days' may, then, have drawn from and depended upon a prior culture of social mockery already circulating within metropolitan society.

The possibility that Brathwaite's text influenced political language in London should not be dismissed.²⁶ Butler suggested that *Mercurius Britannicus* may have been theatrically staged, perhaps in a venue such as the *Fortune* or *Red Bull*, where politically-charged performances concerning ecclesiastical affairs and the Bishops' Wars had been staged.²⁷ Even if the play was never publicly performed, its rapid movement through several editions in 1641 argues for a substantial circulation. One edition warned readers that rival printings under the same title were 'meerly adulterous. This edition is onely true and genuine, all other sordid and surreptitious' – a warning that indicates commercial competition and public demand.²⁸ In these circumstances it is entirely plausible that the phrase 'round heads' entered wider

²⁴Brathwaite, *Mercurius Britannicus*, sig. D4v. In the Latin version this is rendered as 'Apagel quam arrectis auribus ista rotunda capita Pinnerum oratorem suum audiunt'. Evidently the name underwent a change from 'Pinner' to 'Prinner' in translation, although some English editions continued to use 'Pinner': *Mercurius Britannicus, ... tragi-comodoedia lutetiae* (London, 1641), sig. D3.

²⁵Order concerning apprentices, June 1640, London Court of Aldermen, Repertories, The London Archives, COL/CA/01/01/058, fos. 267v–68.

²⁶Butler, 'A case study', pp. 950–2.

²⁷For the context, see the literature cited in n. 21 above and N. W. Bawcutt, 'Puritanism and the closing of the theatres in 1642', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 22 (2009), pp. 179–200; Christopher Highley, 'Early printed responses to the closing of London's playhouses', *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 85:1 (2022), pp. 11–20.

²⁸W. W. Greg, *A bibliography of the English printed drama* (London, 1951), II, pp. 737–8.

political discourse through dramatic/textual satire before the Westminster tumults gave it a much sharper political visibility.

III

The possibility that the term antedated the 'December Days' may help explain why contemporaries themselves often appeared uncertain about the exact origins of the 'Roundhead'. A tract printed in February 1643 observed that 'there hath beene a great noyse and rumour about the appellation and name of Round-heads, but it is not yet apparent, neither by ancient or moderne writers, what these Round-heads should be', and admitted that it remained unclear 'to what use or meanes this name or appellation is applied'.²⁹ Such remarks suggest that the label's genealogy was contested almost from the outset. Rather than emerging fully formed at a single moment, 'Roundhead' appears to have developed through a wider culture of political insult in which terms overlapped, mutated, and rapidly acquired new meanings. Further evidence from David Hyde himself reinforces this interpretation. In January 1642 Daniel Lewis informed the Middlesex justice Laurence Whitaker that he had dined with Hyde and Lord Blayney in St Martin's Lane. During the conversation Hyde reportedly boasted that he had been among the first to attack the apprentices outside Westminster and declared that if large numbers of citizens came to Parliament again, he would kill as many of them as possible, describing them as 'prick eared and cropt eared rascals'.³⁰ Hyde's vocabulary is revealing. He does not use the word 'Roundhead', but he clearly inhabits the same semantic field. Cropped hair, exposed ears, Puritan zeal, and urban disorder were fused together within a clear anti-parliamentarian rhetoric.

The role of John Taylor in popularizing the language of 'Roundheads' during 1642 was especially important. After an attack upon Cheapside Cross in January 1642, Taylor began producing a series of pamphlets anatomizing different kinds of political 'heads'. Among the earliest was *The resolution of the Round-heads*, almost certainly written by Taylor himself.³¹ The pamphlet referred explicitly to the Westminster disturbances recalling how the apprentices had been 'slash[ed] and bastinadoed by a mad crew called the Cavallery'.³² In subsequent publications Taylor expanded the vocabulary through a series of satirical responses involving 'Rattleheads', 'Roundheads', and other political caricatures. The result was what might be described as a kind of textual phrenology in which political identity became mapped onto competing types of physical description. Political allegiance was rendered into a bodily and comic type legible within print. Particularly revealing was Taylor's *Cornu-copia, or roome for a ram-head*, printed around the middle of 1642.³³ The subtitle announced that the work described 'the dignity of the Ram-head above the

²⁹*The master-piece of roundheads* (London, 1643), sig. A1.

³⁰Rushworth, *Historical collections*, IV, p. 482; *Diurnal occurrences*, 8 (8–17 Jan. 1642), p. 3.

³¹[John Taylor], *The resolution of the round-heads to pull downe Cheap-side crosse* (London, 1641 [1642]). On 1 Feb. 1642 the Commons ordered that the pamphlet be referred to the Committee for Printing, and that the text's printer, Stephen Buckle, be ordered to attend: *Journals of the House of Commons*, II, p. 408.

³²Taylor, *Resolution of the round-heads*, sig. A2v.

³³Thomason's copy is collected alongside pamphlets primarily from June: British Library, E.151 (6).

Round-head or Rattle-head'. The pamphlet included a woodcut of a husband sporting the cuckold's horns while his wife brandished a saw to remove them; her hand was being stayed by the husband for reasons explained within the text. Throughout the dialogue Taylor explicitly juxtaposed the different 'heads' circulating in political discourse. The speaker recalled that when he merely possessed a 'round head' he was jeered in the streets as an enemy to bishops and government, whereas the identity of the 'Ram-head' allowed him comparative peace.³⁴ Here the linguistic and interpretative relationship between 'Roundhead', 'Ram-head', and 'Rattlehead' becomes clear: Taylor was not treating these as distinct lexical inventions, but as interconnected series of comic types emerging from the same satirical ecosystem.

Attention to contemporary print culture reinforces this interpretation. The years 1641 and 1642 witnessed an unprecedented expansion in political publication as censorship weakened and polemical conflict intensified. The commercial dynamics of this expansion, its generic inventiveness, and its entanglement with oral and scribal cultures of communication have been richly reconstructed by historians and literary scholars of the press.³⁵ In the rapidly multiplying marketplace of political paper, authors competed to produce shocking stories and memorable caricatures capable of capturing public attention and shifting stock. In such an environment, political language was particularly unstable and experimental; terms coined in jest could become accepted descriptors, while expressions originating in theatrical settings could migrate into demotic speech. The evidence assembled here suggests that 'Roundhead' may well have followed such a trajectory, circulating within a broader ecology of anti-Puritan mockery before becoming stabilized as the primary label for parliament's supporters. The instability of the terminology also reminds us that the political alignments of late 1641 were not yet fully fixed. 'Roundhead' initially functioned less as a coherent party designation than as a flexible insult directed against a spectrum of urban Puritans, reformers, and parliamentary activists. It was only with the deepening polarization of 1642 that the label hardened into a more stable identifier for parliamentarian partisans more generally. The fluidity of the earlier usage helps explain why contemporaries could remain uncertain about the term's exact meaning and origin even after it had entered common circulation: political language moved ahead of political organization as labels preceded settled ideological identities.

IV

The evidence assembled here thus suggests a more complicated genealogy for 'Roundhead' than historians have generally acknowledged. It remains entirely

³⁴[John Taylor], *Cornu-copia, or, roome for a ram-head* (London, 1642), sig. A2v.

³⁵The literature is extensive, but see Alexandra Halasz, *The marketplace of print: pamphlets and the public sphere in early modern England* (Cambridge, 1997); Adam Fox, *Oral and literate culture in England* (Oxford, 2000); Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering in early modern England* (Cambridge, 2003); Jason Peacey, *Print and public politics in the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 2013); David Como, *Radical parliamentarians and the English Civil War* (Oxford, 2018); Michael J. Braddick, 'John Hammond and the explosion of print in 1641: commercial and political opportunities', *Electronic British Library Journal* (2023): <https://doi.org/10.23636/x3b3-8819> (accessed 10 July 2026). For the broader interpretative framework, see Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, 'Rethinking the public sphere in early modern England', *Journal of British Studies*, 45 (2006), pp. 270–92.

possible that Hyde used the term during the Westminster tumults, as Rushworth later believed, but we should recognize that the contemporary evidence points in several different directions. One pamphlet records the insult as 'Ram-headed rogues', while Brathwaite's *Mercurius Britannicus* demonstrates that 'round heads' had already appeared in anti-Puritan satire, perhaps months beforehand. The emergence of 'Roundhead' should therefore be understood less as the spontaneous invention of a single individual than as the product of a broader culture of theatrical satire, anti-Puritan caricature, and political and discursive improvisation during the crisis year of 1641. This revised genealogy has broader implications for the study of political language during the English Revolution. Historians have often treated the labels 'Cavalier' and 'Roundhead' as if they crystallized suddenly in response to political polarization. Yet the evidence examined here suggests that the making of political identities depended heavily upon pre-existing literary and performative traditions. The insults that became party labels were rooted in older comic vocabularies concerning sexuality, bodily appearance, social disorder, and religious enthusiasm. The political culture of 1641 did not invent these tropes from nothing; rather, it repurposed and intensified them within the deepening conflict.³⁶ Recovering this wider cultural background helps explain both the instability of the terminology and also the speed with which it achieved recognizable political meaning. The case of the 'Roundhead' therefore suggests that exploring political language needs to be attentive to the interactions between print, orality, performance, social anxiety, and ideological formation during the English Revolution.

One further reason the history of the term matters is that political nicknames performed important ideological work during the opening stages of the Civil War. They reduced unstable coalitions into legible social types and thereby helped contemporaries imagine the shape of political conflict.³⁷ The labels 'Roundhead' and 'Cavalier' were not neutral descriptors but acts of classification that encoded assumptions about class, religion, gender, and political legitimacy. Royalists deployed the 'Roundhead' calumny to associate parliamentary activism with urban vulgarity, religious enthusiasm, and social inversion. Excavating the confused history of the word's origins therefore illuminates not merely linguistic change but the contested making of political identities during the revolutionary crisis. This process can be compared with the broader development of polemical naming in early modern England. Religious controversy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had already generated a substantial vocabulary of abuse: 'Puritan', 'Precisian', 'Papist', 'Jesuit', and 'Malignant' all carried meanings shaped through prolonged polemical

³⁶These older anti-Puritan comic vocabularies have been mapped in a rich body of literary-historical scholarship: see Holden, *Anti-Puritan satire*; Patrick Collinson, 'Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*: the theatre constructs Puritanism', in David L. Smith, Richard Strier and David Bevington, eds., *The theatrical city: culture, theatre and politics in London, 1576-1649* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 157-69; Kristen Poole, *Radical religion from Shakespeare to Milton: figures of nonconformity in early modern England* (Cambridge, 2000); Peter Lake and Michael Questier, *The Anti-Christ's lewd hat: Protestants, Papists and players in post-Reformation England* (New Haven, CT, 2002), section 4; William Cook Miller, *The enthusiast: anatomy of the fanatic in seventeenth-century British culture* (Ithaca, NY, 2023). A splendid recent study which demonstrates such processes in action is Fullerton, *Sexual politics*.

³⁷I have a forthcoming article on this topic.

struggle, but such labels rarely possessed fixed definitions.³⁸ Instead, they accumulated resonance through repeated use across a variety of oral and written media, and the emergence of 'Roundhead' appears to belong within this longer history of confessional and political naming. What distinguished the early 1640s, however, was the unprecedented speed and intensity with which print and public mobilization accelerated the circulation, adoption, and deployment of these terms.

The theatrical dimensions of this process deserve particular emphasis. Historians of early modern politics have increasingly recognized the extent to which religious and political culture depended upon performance, gesture, costume, and spectacle.³⁹ The insults associated with 'Roundheads' were deeply theatrical in character. They depended upon recognisable visual signs – cropped hair, exposed ears, plain clothing – that could be instantly read by audiences familiar with anti-Puritan caricature, a caricature readily recognizable from the stage. Brathwaite's *Mercurius Britannicus* therefore matters not simply because it may contain the earliest appearance of the term, but because it reveals the performative environment within which such language often operated. The 'Roundhead' first emerged not as an abstract political category but as a staged and embodied social type, and this theatricality also helps explain the productivity of royalist satire during 1642. Pamphleteers such as John Taylor repeatedly constructed fictional speakers, comic dialogues, and grotesque caricatures through which political divisions could be dramatized for readers. The proliferation of 'Roundheads', 'Rattleheads', and 'Ram-heads' reflected more than simple wordplay; it also represented an attempt to stabilize political conflict by converting ideological opponents into comic types. Writers like Taylor were products of the pre-1640s world of libel, jest-books, and city comedies, and they adapted these traditions to the immediate pressures of political crisis. The emergence of 'Roundhead' thus needs to be situated within older satiric forms as well as the performative logics of the newly expanded print marketplace.

The historiographical implications of this argument extend beyond the specific case of 'Roundhead'. Histories of the English Revolution have often privileged ideological texts, constitutional debates, and religious programmes when explaining political alignment. Yet the evidence examined here suggests that ridicule, caricature, and bodily symbolism also played important roles in shaping political consciousness. Political identities were not formed exclusively through abstract principles; they were equally produced through laughter, insult, spectacle, and repetition.⁴⁰ The making of the 'Roundhead' demonstrates how political culture operated simultaneously at intellectual and popular levels, drawing together literary traditions, urban sociability, crowd action, and the rapidly expanding world of print. Indeed, one might argue that the success of the term derived precisely from its openness; the Roundhead's simultaneous associations with youth, appearance, religious

³⁸See Koji Yamamoto, ed., *Stereotypes and stereotyping in early modern England: Puritans, Papists and projectors* (Manchester, 2022); Thomas Leng, 'The meanings of "malignancy": the language of enmity and the construction of the parliamentary cause in the English Revolution', *Journal of British Studies*, 53 (2014), pp. 835–58.

³⁹The seminal intervention in this regard is Lake and Questier, *Anti-Christ's lewd hat*.

⁴⁰Again, Samuel Fullerton's work is an important referent here. On laughter and ridicule as political forces across the early modern period, see Mark Knights and Adam Morton, eds., *The power of laughter and satire in early modern Britain: political and religious culture, 1500–1820* (Woodbridge, 2017).

radicalism, social disorder, and masculine inadequacy meant that it could function across different registers of political communication. Royalist writers could mobilize the label against parliamentary crowds, sectarian preachers, reforming MPs, or London citizens without needing to specify exact ideological distinctions. The term was useful because it condensed a diffuse set of anxieties about the direction of political change into a single memorable image, and this kind of semantic elasticity helps explain both the rapid success of the word and the difficulty contemporaries experienced in identifying its precise origins.