Children’s Literature – Dr. Terry Sosnowski

ROBIN HOOD: TO USE OR NOT TO USE

by Sharon Royer

Stories of Robin Hood, hero of the common people, have survived for over six hundred years. However, two major controversies have accompanied those same tales in relation to children’s literature. First, how should the tales of Robin Hood be presented: Was he a real person or the result of wandering storytellers’ imaginations? Second, is the manner in which violence is glorified in several of the tales sufficient reason to omit them from children’s literature programs? After careful research, I have concluded that Robin Hood’s stories should not be presented as entirely fictional and that the stories provide a valuable contribution to any children’s literature program.

The various Robin Hood tales, if presented at all, are frequently set forth as fairy tales. However, information about traditional literature in general supports the idea that Robin Hood could not have been entirely fictional. Richard Cavendish, editor of Legends of the World, states that legends have “a foundation of some kind in fact . . . [they are] based on people who really lived or places that really existed or events that actually happened, to which tales have clustered and clung” (9). Hence, it can be assumed that there is at least a basis of fact to the Robin Hood legends. Bernard Miles, author of Robin Hood: His Life and Legend, further emphasizes that point by reasoning that what has been true of similar legends, can be assumed to be true of the Robin Hood legend. He explains that for hundreds of years people said the stories of King Arthur and the Greek hero Odysseus were fairy tales. Yet, today the men are known to have existed, “only they were such remarkable men that the stories of their lives lived on after they were dead and fresh adventures were added to their real ones . . . And that is how it happened with Robin” (46). Also, simply because of the longevity of legends themselves, the author of the only Robin Hood page on the Web, which has been used as a reference for educational programming, states positively that “the multitude of paintings, tales, books, and other writings seem to show how he WAS a real person” (“Ben’s Realm” 3). Yet, it is possible to move beyond general references concerning traditional literature to specific evidence of Robin Hood’s authenticity.

There is a great deal of documented, historical evidence that supports the idea that Robin Hood actually existed. Robin Hood is traditionally dated as living from 1160 to 1247 during the reigns of King Richard I and his brother
King John (Cavendish 276). The earliest written reference to Robin Hood occurs in the 1370's in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* where a priest says that he knows "rymes of Robin Hood." The manner in which this was written indicates that such tales were popular long before they were written down. Also, the amount of time that had passed since Robin died would seem to be "an appropriate period for a real outlaw, who was in and out of royal favour, to develop a widespread legend" (Knight 24). Hence, confirming the dates as realistic possibilities for Robin Hood's lifetime.

Also, a record from a court session in Yorkshire in 1226 notes "the confiscation of the goods of one Robert Hod, described as a fugitive. He owed the money to St. Peter's, York, which has a general appropriateness to Robin's hostility to the established church in that city" (Knight 24). This would indicate that Robin Hood frequented the area of Yorkshire, the location of the royal Barnsdale forest, which he is associated with in the earliest tales. Further proof of his activities in Barnsdale can be seen in a document that records William de Lamberton, Robert Wishart, and Henry Abbot of Scone being sent south as prisoners and their guard being increased "on account of Barnsdale" (qtd. In Holt 52). It can be concluded that Barnsdale was known as an area of special danger to travelers.

Further support of Robin Hood as a true historical person is provided by William Stukeley of Stamford, a doctor and parson, in a 'pedigree of Robin Hood earl of Huntingdon.' Stukeley traced the family of Robin Hood back to William the Conqueror's niece on one side and the Anglo-Saxon Earl Waltheof on the other. Stukeley's dates also place Robin Hood in the days of King John (Knight 19). Stukeley's findings were confirmed by the discovery of the playwright, Anthony Munday, that the lord of Barnsdale was in fact the Earl of Huntingdon, the younger brother of King William the Lion of Scotland, living in England (Knight 31). While this information may appear conclusive, much opposition continues to be raised about the authenticity of Robin Hood.

There are some scholars who assert that the Robin Hood legends are entirely fictional. Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia states that Robin Hood was a mythical character, introduced in connection with the May-Day celebrations. It is claimed that "an argument against the hero's existence is the fact that he is mentioned by no historian of the time during which he is supposed to have lived" and that "the events referred to in the stories could not all have occurred in his lifetime" ("Robin Hood"). This fails to take into account that legends were popular long before they were written down and that they have been added to and modified over the centuries.
Robin McKinley, author of *The Outlaws of Sherwood*, a retelling of the Robin Hood legend, says that she believes that “our ideas [of Robin Hood’s identity] are as incompatible with each other as they are with history” (182). This attitude may result from the many Robin Hoods that have been identified over the centuries. The same thought is reiterated by the historians Dobson and Taylor who claim that “the discovery of the name Robert or Robin Hood in a medieval English document is not in itself of particular significance” (qtd. in Knight 15). However, an explanation for this is provided on the Robin Hood web page in a quotation from Edward C. Meyers. He comments that the abundance of Robin Hoods over the centuries can be accounted for because of the practice of law officers in England during the 13th and 14th centuries to use the name Robin Hood as a temporary identification of unknown captured outlaws, much as John Doe is used by modern police (“Ben’s Realm” 4).

The view of all scholars concerned with the idea of Robin Hood as a real person is generalized in *Great Mysteries of the Past* where it is stated that “most scholars now agree that he [Robin Hood] represents a type—the outlaw hero—that was celebrated in ballads handed down from generation to generation” (“On the Trail” 287). Obviously, this does not take into account the findings of many historians and scholars concerning legends in general and the Robin Hood legend in particular. None of those opposed to the idea of Robin Hood’s authenticity have been able to provide conclusive evidence that he is purely fictional, for as Sir James Holt (who has studied Robin Hood for over thirty years) pointed out, it has never been proven that Robin Hood did not exist (“Robin Hood” video).

It is preferable to present the Robin Hood stories as not entirely fictional based on the information known about traditional literature in general and the availability of documented evidence. While some scholars claim that Robin Hood could not have been a real person, their conclusions are generally based on contradictions that occur in later, edited versions of the tales. Also, it should be taken into account that the perception of history in the 20th century is significantly different from what it was 700 years ago because “we have what we call the media now, with the result that history tends to be even-handed and instantaneous.” People who oppose the idea of a real Robin Hood point to the fact that the longbow, which is the weapon he is usually said to have used, is not documented as being in use during his lifetime. Yet, historians now know that “the English were quietly using the longbow as a hunting weapon long before Edward III faced the French at Crecy, which is when the English longbow enters 20th century textbooks” (McKinley 281). This provides a fascinating new perspective on history that children might be eager to explore. It is the sum total of this evidence which can allow teachers of children’s literature to present students with the tales of Robin Hood separate from the lesson on fairy tales.
Another significant controversy surrounding the Robin Hood legends is the presence of violence. Robin Hood has been described as "quick-witted, daring, resourceful, generous, humorous and sometimes cruel" (Cavendish 276). It is the latter characteristic that has raised some doubts as to the appropriateness of sharing Robin Hood's tales. Even one of Robin's most avid supporters admits that "there are stories of Robin Hood's tendency for unnecessary violence. Whether this is true or simply propaganda added by monks or whatnot is unknown" ("Ben's Realm" 3). This violence was sometimes directed at the corrupt officials of the church, as can be seen in 'Robin Hood and the Monk' when, in disguise, Robins's men "meet the monk, [and] kill him out of hand" in return for betrayal of their faith (qtd. in Knight 53). Richard Cavendish also makes mention of Robin Hood's practice of taking "the law into his own hands to right wrong. In the early stories he does so with a ruthless ferocity" (276). An example of this can be seen when in one tale, Robin beheads Sir Guy of Gisbourne, a bounty hunter who desires to wed Robin's love, and carries his head on top of his bow, later defacing it with a knife (Knight 57). Of course, it is not necessary that children be exposed to this particular tale if it is age-inappropriate.

However, the value that can be derived from the use of the Robin Hood tales in the classroom outweighs the objections to Robin's sometimes inappropriate reliance on violence. Simply as an example of one of the few ballads that has its origins in such early recorded form, the tales of Robin Hood have literary merit. They also serve "moral and exemplary purposes" (Cavendish 12). Robin Hood's enemies were not the entire class of those who were wealthy and powerful, "but those of them who misuse their position to oppress honest men" (Cavendish 276). His actions communicated the idea that the entire social order does not have to be overthrown in order to bring about change, but that those who abuse it need to be challenged.

There was a historical basis to many of the exemplary lessons communicated in the Robin Hood tales, which were meant to be imitated. Robin Hood lived during the time that feudalism was coming to an end and the middle class was gaining power. However, the lawmakers of the time had instituted rigid laws to keep down the rising middle class (Keen 20-21). Yet, Robin "refuses to accept coercive power as a basis for protecting those who are less than powerful" (Knight 5). These tales communicated an important lesson to the common people of his time about their reaction to such legislation. However, the Robin Hood legends can serve an even more valuable purpose than transmitting these instructional lessons.

Donna E. Norton, author of Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature, states that "legends help children understand the conditions of times that created a need for brave and honorable men and
women” (308). Richard Cavendish agrees, “They [legends] are part of the inherited conglomerate of accepted beliefs, values, and attitudes which give a people its identity. These stories consequently provide invaluable evidence about the societies that give birth to them, and insights into human nature in general” (9). Many insights can be gained from the study of these tales. For example, Robin Hood represented to the common people of England what King Arthur symbolized for the aristocracy (Miles 8). He also demonstrated the universal human need for heroes in a country’s past on which to build a shared tradition and pride (Cavendish 13). This can be seen by the fact that modern “Robin Hoods” can be found almost anywhere. For example, Salvatore Giuliano, in 1943, was viewed as both the hero of Sicilian independence and a wanted fugitive, much the same as the original Robin Hood (“On the Trail” 287). Robin Hood “retains considerable and continuing importance as a way to organize and express ideas about authority” (Knight x). For example, his presence can be found in almost every major genre of literature, as well as dramas and operas.

As a result of the aforementioned themes and purposes of Robin Hood, applications can be drawn for contemporary life, making the tales even more useful to children. For example, the author of the web page dedicated to Robin Hood concludes that, “Robin Hood is not just a man, he also stands for our ideals and how we must strive to make things right even if there’s little hope of succeeding” (“Ben’s Realm” 14). This is certainly applicable to children who may often feel powerless to accomplish their desires because of their size and lack of authority. Yet, Bernard Miles goes even farther, right to the heart of the Robin Hood legends:

He [Robin Hood] was one of the first in a long line of men and women who believed that freedom is more precious than life itself. After centuries of struggle, that freedom has been handed down to you and me. It has been a long and up-hill battle, but for us and for our children it is won.

Now we have the task of guarding it and of bringing it to others. And if Robin were alive today he would be among the first to help us. (123)

Robin Hood deserves a place in children’s literature programs; not as a fairy tale but as a story grounded in fact, and not as a glorification of violence but as a means to understand that the people in a different time and place had unique needs but were similar to those living today. A study of the legendary outlaw, Robin Hood, can result in children doing further research, taking part in creative writing, and staging dramatizations. Donna E. Norton states conclusively that, “stories of Robin Hood are popular with children . . . [they] enjoy comparing the various editions and describing the strengths and
weaknesses of each" (308). This adds enjoyment to all of the other benefits that can be derived from a study of Robin Hood. It should therefore be concluded that the legends of Robin Hood have rightfully earned a place in any children’s literature program.

Works Cited


