

Is Robin Hood Alive in Your Classroom?

Sharon E. Royer

For over six hundred years, children have heard about the courageous Englishman who stole from the rich and gave to the poor, the hero of the common people, the infamous Robin Hood. However, today two major controversies accompany these enduring tales in relation to adolescent literature. The first controversy centers on whether the tales of Robin Hood should be presented as fact or fiction. The second controversy revolves around the appropriateness of the tales for use in literature programs.

Robin Hood: Fact, Fiction, or Legend?

The tales of Robin Hood fall under the classification of legends, within the broader context of traditional literature. Yet, rather than being presented as legends, they are often treated as nothing more than folk-tales. Richard Cavendish, editor of *Legends of the World* (1982) explains the difference: "That legends are accepted as authentic in their own milieu, however, broadly distinguishes them from folk-tales, which are not told as historically true" (11). Information about legends in general supports the idea that Robin Hood could not have been entirely fictional. Cavendish 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). This idea is confirmed by the *World Book Encyclopedia*, which states that legends "are based on real people or events" (Workman 183). Therefore, the very minimum that can be assumed is that there is some 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 is true of the Robin Hood legend. He explains that for hundreds of years people classified the stories of King Arthur and the Greek hero Odysseus as 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). A summary of the evidence and current opinions on this issue follows.

Arguments for Robin Hood as Fact

A substantial amount of documented historical evidence supports the idea that Robin Hood actually existed. Robin Hood is traditionally dated as living from 1160 to 1247, during the reigns of King Henry II, King Richard I, and Richard's brother, King John (McSpadden and Wilson 13).

Mair, a Scottish writer, first gave these dates in the early sixteenth century in the *History of Great Britain* (McSpadden and Wilson 15). The earliest written reference to Robin Hood occurs in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (1370), where a priest says that he knows "rymes of Robin Hood." However, the manner in which this was written indicates that such "rymes" were well known 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 favor, to develop a widespread legend" (Knight 24). This permits the traditional dates to be considered as realistic possibilities for Robin's lifetime.

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

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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, and not Sherwood Forest where contemporary works place him. Further proof of his activities in Barnsdale appears 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" (quoted in Holt 52). This statement shows that Barnsdale was known as an area of special danger to travelers, probably a result of outlaw activity.

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. Therefore, Robin Hood was given credibility by being connected to verifiable historical figures. Stukeley's dates also place Robin Hood in the days of King John (Knight 19). Stukeley's findings were confirmed by a discovery by 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). This further increases Robin Hood's credibility by confirming the epitaph on what is believed to be his gravestone near Kirklees Priory, Yorkshire. The epitaph (with spelling modernized) reads:

Here underneath this little stone
Lies Robert, Earl of Huntingdon

Ne'er archer was as he so good
And people called him Robin Hood
Such outlaws as he and his men
Will England never see again. ("Robin Hood")

However, much opposition continues to be raised about the authenticity of Robin Hood.

Arguments for Robin Hood as Fiction

Some sources 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. The entry claims 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 told orally long before they were written down and that they were added to and modified over the centuries. Another common argument against the authenticity of Robin Hood is that the abundance of "Robin Hoods" in English records over the centuries indicates that one "true" Robin Hood never existed. Historians Dobson and Taylor admit that "the discovery of the name Robert or Robin Hood in a medieval English document is not in itself of particular significance" (quoted in Knight 15). However, Edward C. Meyers explains that the abundance of Robin Hoods can be accounted for because of a certain practice of law officers in England during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. They used the name "Robin Hood" as a temporary identification of unknown captured outlaws, much as "John Doe" is used by modern police (quoted in "Ben's Realm" 4).

The view of many scholars concerned with the idea of Robin Hood as a real person is summarized in *Great Mysteries of the Past*, which states 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). Unfortunately, this does not take into account the findings of many historians and scholars concerning legends in general and the Robin Hood legend in particular. Many scholars' claims that Robin Hood could not have been a real person are based on contradictions that occur in later, edited versions of the tales.

Robin Hood and History

Another factor that must be considered is that the perception of history in the 21st century is significantly different from what it was over 700 years ago. The difference is a consequence of the nature of school textbooks "with the result that history tends to be even-handed and instantaneous" (McKinley 281). In other words, events may sometimes be inappropriately forced into slots on a timeline, because that is the most convenient way to study history in the 21st century. People who oppose the idea of a real Robin Hood point to the fact that the longbow, 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). Therefore, when considering the Robin Hood legends, caution must be used in the identification of dates when events might have occurred.

Robin Hood as Literature

The second significant controversy surrounding the Robin Hood legends concerns their appropriateness for use in a literature program. Opponents of use of the tales in the classroom often point to the presence of violence. Richard Cavendish mentions 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). He describes Robin Hood as "quick-witted, daring, resourceful, generous, humorous and sometimes cruel" (Cavendish 276). One example of Robin's violence can be seen when he beheads Sir Guy of Gisbourne (a bounty hunter who desires to wed Robin's love interest) and carries his head on top of his bow, later defacing it with a knife (Knight 57).

Such violence has become a growing concern for parents and teachers, especially in twenty-first century American society, where the fear of violence is increasing and the question of the appropriateness of vigilantism is still unsettled. However, J.

Walker McSpadden cautions that "we must not make too much of these traits in the turbulence and lawlessness of early days, when king warred against noble and noble against bishop, and all three oppressed the common people, to whom the law gave no redress" (11). Many things that were common in historical times are largely unacceptable today. However, history can not be rewritten to support 21st century ideas of what ought to have been the case. Robin Hood's legends should not be eliminated from literature programs because of his unlawful actions, any more than the Boston Tea Party should be left out of the story of the American Revolution.

Robin Hood In the Classroom

Those who favor the use of Robin Hood legends in the classroom believe the value that can be derived from the use of the legends outweighs the objections to Robin's use of violence. Simply as an example of one of the few legends that has its origins in such early-recorded form, the tales of Robin Hood have literary merit. The legends also raise some interesting questions. Many of the lessons communicated in the Robin Hood tales have a historical basis. Robin Hood lived during the time when feudalism was coming to an end and the middle class was gaining power (Keen 20). There was oppression by the Church and State in addition to struggles between Saxon landlords and their Norman conquerors (McSpadden and Wilson 11). Yet, Robin refused "to accept coercive power as a basis for protecting those who are less than powerful" and constantly fought against the use of such power (Knight 5). These tales communicated an important lesson to the common people of his time

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about their reaction to such government. For example, Robin Hood's enemy was not the entire class of the wealthy and powerful, "but those of them who misuse their position to oppress honest men" (Cavendish 276). His legendary 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. Against this backdrop, the signing of the Magna Carta occurred. On June 15, 1215 King John was forced to set his seal to the document. The Magna Carta outlined the liberties that were guaranteed to the English people and went on to become the foundation of the constitutions of every English-speaking nation ("Magna"). Therefore, Robin Hood lived during an exceptionally significant time in history.

Donna E. Norton, author of the textbook *Through the Eyes of a Child* (1995), states that "legends help children understand the conditions of times that created a need for brave. . . men and women" (308). Richard Cavendish agrees: 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 the Robin Hood legend. Robin Hood was more than an outlaw who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. He was part of the historical movement away from feudalism and slavery and towards human rights. He was one of the many people who saw the need for democracy and witnessed the first step in achieving it with the signing of the Magna Carta. Robin Hood represented to the common people of England what King Arthur symbolized for the aristocracy: both were upholders of true justice (Miles 8).

The legend of Robin Hood is made even more practical for adolescents because it applies to contemporary life and values. The author of one Web page 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). Richard Cavendish concurs, "The lesson which the supreme heroes of legend and history have to teach is that. . .the limits of human reach and achievement are not as narrow and restricted as they so often seem" (13). This is certainly applicable to adolescents who may often feel powerless to accomplish their desires because of their age and lack of authority. Yet if one looks deeper, right to the heart of the Robin Hood legends, the most important lesson to be learned and applied is this:

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. (Miles 123)

These connections, which transcend time and place, are what have made the Robin Hood legends so enduring and appealing to young people of all ages.

Versions of the Tale

Robin Hood's presence can also be found in almost every major genre of literature, dramas, operas, and most recently in movie theatres. There are also some excellent versions of

the Robin Hood legend available for young people. One exceptional example is *The Adventures of Robin Hood and His Merry Outlaws* (1984), retold from the old ballads by J. Walker McSpadden and Charles Wilson with illustrations by Howard Pyle and Thomas Heath Robinson. In this 1984 version each story is introduced by verses from the ballad it is based on, and the exact language is used frequently. Another notable example is *Robin Hood: His Life and Legend* (1984), by Bernard Miles, which includes an excellent map of important locations in Robin Hood's life. The accessibility of the Robin Hood legends increases the potential impact of the legend on adolescents.

Donna E. Norton states conclusively that the "stories of Robin Hood are popular with children" (308). This adds enjoyment to all of the other benefits that can be derived from a study of Robin Hood. Robin Hood deserves a place in children's literature programs—not as a folk-tale but as a story grounded in fact, not as a glorification of violence but as a means to understand that the people in a different time and place were unique yet similar to people living today. Robin Hood is alive and well in history, in the theater, and in literature. Is he alive in your classroom?

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Sharon Royer credits Mr. Tom Clark, a teacher of senior English at Jackson High School in Massillon, Ohio, for her interest in British literature. She is currently a teacher of 7th grade reading and language arts. When not teaching, she enjoys line dancing and competing as a member of an area dance team.