

Maid Marian Made Possible:

Feminist Advances in Late Twentieth-century Retellings of the Robin Hood Legend for Young Adults

Both Robin McKinley and Esther Friesner, contemporary retellers of the Robin Hood legend, refer to Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* as their first significant introduction to the legend. Pyle's text retells most, if not all, of the Robin Hood ballads (a mere glance through the table of contents reveals 20 of these ballads, from "Robin Hood and the Tinker" to "Robin Hood and Guy of Gisbourne"). However, Pyle's text does not handle the ballad of "Robin Hood and Maid Marian"—nor does it explore Maid Marian's role in the legend. As a result, the very text that feeds and informs the Robin Hood legend of the twentieth century is thorough in its treatment of literary heroism but blind to heroism as a female potential.

Considering the interest in the effects of literature on the gender and social development of the young adult reader, an interest in those writers who follow Pyle and are subsequently influenced by his work articulates just what effect his narrative has had on contemporary authors' notions of female heroism. In stark contrast to Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*, in which female characters—if present at all—are peripheral and one-dimensional, his literary descendants, such as Robin McKinley's *The Outlaws of Sherwood* characterize Maid Marian and describe her not only in relationship to men, but in partnership with them, thereby describing how male quest narratives written by contemporary women writers have augmented the Robin Hood legend. Esther Friesner's *The Sherwood Game* continues this work, thereby providing a preview of the "developments in

female-centered narrative made possible for the legend by late 20th Century advances in feminist thinking" (McDonnell).

Because it is one of the first, and most popular, Robin Hood retellings authored by a woman, our hopes for *The Outlaws of Sherwood* include the integration of the female hero¹. That McKinley's Maid Marian is a significant individual is important. She is active, witty, smart, and genuine—and an old and good friend to Robin. It is this characterization that allows McKinley's Marian to pursue her heroic potential in the text and to play a role as vital and as valuable as the other legendary characters (such as Little John, Much the Miller's Son, and Will Scarlet). As Marilyn Kerrenebrock reminds us:

McKinley's females do not simmer; they do not betray their own nature to win a man's approval. But neither do they take love lightly or put their own desires before anything else. In McKinley's books, the romance, like the adventure, is based upon ideas of faithfulness, duty and honor. (52)

In view of McKinley's references and stated indebtedness to Howard Pyle, with whose Robin Hood author McKinley "grew up," this liberation of Marian's character is significant (McKinley 276). In Robin McKinley we have a woman author who has chosen to go against traditional, ideological, and gendered social training to deliver a female character with heroic potential.

The heroic potential of Robin McKinley's Maid Marian is first articulated and deployed in the introduction of her character. It is immediate. As *The*

Outlaws of Sherwood opens, Robin (a lesser forester), Marian, and Much are making their separate ways to the Nottingham Fair (McKinley 6). While traveling through Sherwood to meet his friends, Robin has time to reflect on his misfortunes: his father has recently died, and the strain on his finances is leaving him rather hungry. Interestingly, although Marian is not with him, her voice has a prominent place in the narrative from the outset. In Robin's imagination and memory, Marian is such a necessary component to his story that things she has said, as well as things she might say in response to his concerns and considerations, direct his actions—and, more significantly perhaps, our interpretation of the action:

He did consider, twice a year, as fair time approached, the noble—possibly even royal—favour he might curry by a fine tournament. But—as he told himself—royal favour was a notoriously chancy (and expensive) thing and at best a long-term one; and the Sheriff of Nottingham had a short-term mind [. . .] many times [Marian had] made Much and Robin laugh till their sides hurt with her deadly imitations of the sheriff and his society. Once Robin said to her, “But your stories are second- and third-hand. How do you *know*?” “I don't,” said Marian cheerfully. “But I am a good guesser—and a good actor, am I not?”

Robin said teasingly, “I will tell you what you already know if you promise that you will not run off with a band of wandering players.”

“I will not have to,” replied Marian, “so long as evading my father's questions when I wish to spend a day with you continues to exercise my talents so usefully [. . .] .” He did not hate the fact that he was a second-rate archer; and Much and Marian knew him and were his friends...But Much and Marian would be bringing their bows and would think it odd if he did not, for they were all to enter the contest. Privately Robin felt that Marian had a good chance of winning [. . .] . (McKinley 2-5)

What we learn of Marian's character—the generosity of her feelings for her friends and the regard she feels towards them, her gift for performing story, as well as her superior archery skills—because, rendered by Robin, allow not only for Marian to be described by Robin, but for Robin to be described. This turns out to be empowering to their characterization of each other in that neither defines or controls the other. Additionally, their mutual description serves as a good introduction to their characters in that they give the audience each other's best selves. Robin responds to Marian by responding to what he understands to be her perception of him.

This mutually defining construction of characterization continues past the introductory pages of McKinley's Robin Hood retelling and begins to gesture toward more complicated subject matter, the construction of gender. *The Outlaws of Sherwood* is told from an omniscient point of view focusing largely on Robin despite the directive powers of Marian's “voice.” Because of this, one of the most compelling acts of Marian's traditional character, disguising herself as a male to stand with Robin and his band, is necessarily foreshortened. As Robin reflects on Marian's chance of winning the Nottingham Fair's archery contest and his own indecision regarding being able to pay the entrance fee—*through allusion only*—do we learn that:

Marian had a good chance of winning; she was one of those who always allowed for the breeze that would kick up from nowhere after the arrow had left the string. They might not like it when she proved to be a girl, but no one would notice in the crowd when the three of them signed up together, for she would be wearing boy's clothes, with her hair up under a hat; and after she won, Robin didn't think they'd deny her the prize. (McKinley 6)

Marian's cross-dressing disguise, taken directly from the seventeenth century ballad “Robin Hood and Maid Marian” (Child 150), here reimagined by McKinley and presented by way of Robin's thoughts, is actually two performative acts in one; it is a performance of gender as well as of skill, conflating and poking holes through traditional social prescriptions for gendered behavior in a way quite reminiscent of a young Robin McKinley. As Amanda J. Ridder explains:

The heroines in McKinley's books reflect certain qualities that she saw in herself as a young woman: clumsiness, plainness, bookishness and disinterest in the usual social games that involve flirting and dating [. . .] . She believes that most girls go through a time growing up when they believe they must have an innate greatness and destiny beyond the apparent; that they are in fact lost princesses, switched at birth. (<http://www.cif.rochester.edu/users/harimad/McKinley.html>)

Quite literally, Marian's disguise puts her on a level playing field necessary to prove inherent skills regardless of sex and gender.

As it is, Marian never enters the contest, and we thus have no way to consider how her subversive act is received. But her intent to participate in the archery contest does allow Marian to enter Sherwood as a

male in order to find Robin, who has been accused of murder and suddenly outlawed. Marian's entrance into Sherwood also allows the novel to fulfill the expectations of the popular legend by having Marian support Much's suggestion that Robin, with the help of his two dear friends, take up the cause and leadership of the unjustly outlawed. The three friends argue at length:

Much and Marian exchanged glances. "We will not be entirely cut off from the outside world," said Marian carefully.

"You cannot be a part of this madness, Marian," said Robin sharply; "You always had less patience with Much's will-o'-the-wisps than I did."

"Nor am I an overtaxed farmer or an outlaw in hiding?" said Marian. "It is possible that it is exactly that that leaves my head clear to judge what you cannot judge—" [. . .] .

There was a long pause. Robin looked at his two friends, seated now on either side of him, and it occurred to him that they were going to take him into custody as inexorably as any king's forester might: their faces told him that. "Oh, to the devil with you, and your troop of merry bandits with you," he said. "I promise." (McKinley 21)

It must be noted that neither the brevity of Marian's actual voice nor the omniscient narration of McKinley's novel detracts from its promise of female heroism. One of the charms of *The Outlaws of Sherwood* is its representation of a democracy within an unjust feudal system. As that feudal system is in transition, both the democratic and cooperative spirit of McKinley's outlaw band and Marian's offering of her own participation have a liberating effect that stands outside of singular characterization. Male disguise, here, is not purely in the service of gender subversion and social disruption envisaged by gay and lesbian studies (Butler), nor is it only in the service of female empowerment (Gilbert and Gubar). Instead, Robin McKinley's *The Outlaws of Sherwood* begins to describe theoretical and ideological "possibilities" and to offer methods by which one might transform social inequities. Traditionally, this has been a concept and application of the Robin Hood legend, since, as Clare Sponsler has noted, "the most culturally creative response [. . .] was to co-opt misrule" (46). These "possibilities" are what Robin McKinley gives to the developing young adult reader in her own "creative response" to the Robin Hood legend.

As a result of its interpretation of, and interaction with, the traditional legend, as well as with Howard Pyle's retelling of it, Robin McKinley's *The Outlaws of Sherwood* asks the reader to consider the implications of disguising one's gender, to reflect upon what opportunities doing so would make available, at the same time that it uses those considerations as an eloquent and effective stand-in for actual experience. *The Outlaws of Sherwood* encourages all readers to imagine female heroism and to integrate it as a possibility in, and for, their lives. This allows the female readers of McKinley's text to be introduced to the Robin Hood legend as a liberating and empowering experience in their own gendered, social development even as it serves to inform and expand the experience of the male reader.

McKinley shapes her narrative of gender disguise in such a way as to make the disruption of gender inequity a positive act of utmost importance. Toward the conclusion of McKinley's retelling, King Richard pardons the 12 merry "men" who organized the outlaw revolt, describing his pardon as "the King's whim;" the outlaws' number is not high enough to warrant royal pardon, but Richard has enjoyed the stories of their exploits and cannot resist participating vicariously by condoning their actions (McKinley 274). McKinley's retelling is ultimately an exploration of democracy and cooperation—a valid aspect of the multifaceted Robin Hood legend. And Richard's pardon is, in part, about supporting and stabilizing the democratic ideal, in which all persons are created equal. This is a worthy lesson, and it is fitting that McKinley's text should allow it to live on in a necessarily updated retelling of the Robin Hood legend.

Esther Friesner's *The Sherwood Game* also offers some exciting and viable alternatives. As constructed in Friesner's novel, Maid Marian is representative of "developments in female-centred narrative" (McDonnell). At times more *Frankenstein* than Robin Hood, Esther Friesner's sci-fi-informed *The Sherwood Game* moves the Robin Hood legend into virtual reality, thereby creating a bridge between fantasy and science fiction and further mediating the interactive relationship between text and reader. Friesner's novel is set in the future. This is a future that includes the creation and production of life-sized "andromechs," robots formed in the human image and used for personal pleasure (mainly sexual). Friesner's future also

allows for an examination of contemporary ideas of history and the art and influence of medievalism. Our protagonist is Carl Sherwood, a brilliant but bored and inherently fearful computer engineer moldering away at Manifest, Inc. Instead of putting his time and energy toward the Banks Project, which involves the manufacture of several andromechs for an adult “amusement” park in Japan, Carl Sherwood earns his overtime by designing a virtual reality game, strictly against company policy.

Carl’s game is a computer-enabled retelling of, and interaction with, the Robin Hood legend as the legend has been informed, most notably, by Howard

Pyle’s *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood of Great Renown in Nottinghamshire*.

Following tradition, a “visitor” to Sherwood Forest is met by the virtual Robin Hood, invited to best Robin Hood in battle, and when successful, invited to join the band and instructed in the use of longbow and broadsword. The adventures that follow include such familiar characters as Little John, Will Scarlett, Much the Miller’s Son, the Sheriff of Nottingham, and several minor “cast” players, most of whom are not programmed to the same degree of sophistication as Robin Hood and

whose friendship and aid are secondary only to those of the visitor-player—a role both selfishly and protectively guarded by Carl Sherwood. Much to Robin Hood’s dismay, Maid Marian has strictly been left out of the game. Carl’s insistence on that exclusion presumably stems from an overbearing father and little-to-no luck with women (though it should be noted how closely Carl’s characterization mirrors that of Pyle).

Trouble begins—and the novel really takes off—when Robin Hood becomes more sophisticated than even his creator could have dreamed due to a glitch in the game’s programming. As a self-aware entity with both memory and an ability to learn, the virtual Robin Hood remains true to his character profile, robbing from the rich to give to the poor, fighting authority on behalf of the voiceless and oppressed, using his clever intellect to outsmart his opponents and his charm to bend everyone else to his will. And when this combination of intellect and charm becomes self-aware—especially within the confines of a computer game—the results are provocative. It is not long before Robin discovers the means by which to manipulate Carl into giving andromech bodies to him and his co-conspiratorial Merry Men so that they may more effectively (and through their cunning knowledge of the Internet) satisfy their demands for justice. This forces Carl to seek the help of his co-worker, Laurie Pincus, and of Eddie Shepherd.

The dualism of Esther Friesner’s *The Sherwood Game*, where science fiction and fantasy, as well as development and reader, meet and are well matched, is never so instructive as when it shapes the character of Maid Marian. Because Friesner’s text involves two sets of characters, the real and the virtually real, the reader is gifted with two “Marians.” One has been with us from the outset of the novel in the form of Laurie Pincus, Carl Sherwood’s colleague and friend. The other is a traditional Maid Marian from Carl’s imagination, a late addition to the game and one added specifically to lure Robin Hood back under control. Thus, Friesner’s text demands that we chart the experiences of two female heroes.

But Friesner’s dualism is ultimately expansive, embracing and recognizing not only the shared experiences of Laurie and Maid Marian, but also those of Carl and Robin Hood, Eddie and Little John, and the text and reader. And it is this quality of *The Sherwood Game* that discloses the effects of the text on the reader even as it reverses the focus to examine the effects of the reader on the text. Such embracing, recognizing, and subverting empower Friesner’s readers and allow her “real” characters, like *their* own computerized and andromechanized creations, to be self-aware and to describe their own heroism by referencing others and sharing their experiential knowledge.

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Laurie describes the potential benefits of this awareness when explaining the Comanche peyote ritual to Eddie, his own cultural heroic inheritance, while strolling through the virtual Sherwood Forest:

“The peyote rite was also intended as a ritual of healing. When everything hurts so much that all you can do is cry out to God, ‘why me?’ it’s good to have a way to get an answer, or at least to feel as if you’re not just standing there hollering into the void. You’re not supposed to live in the ritual—or any healing time—any more than you’re supposed to live in the game. You get help, you get out, you go on.” (275)

Significantly, what Laurie is describing is her own, and Maid Marian’s, emotional impetus for self-discovery and self-improvement. Each is driven to assist her respective Robin Hood but also to serve a higher goal: the protection of the rights and the safe development of children.

Robin Hood’s Internet activities in the outside world bring to light the understanding that, because they have been based on the character programming of Robin Hood, the child andromechs are destined to be self-aware entities: children who know who they are and exactly what is happening to them at the adult amusement park. But Robin Hood has been confined, especially by his own good word, to the game. It is up to Maid Marian and Laurie, Carl, and Eddie to enter the game, to ensure that Robin will stay there and that he will not cause any more trouble. They may then return to Manifest, Inc. so they can set things right for the child andromechs by exposing Regis Lyons, the owner of the company (his name a pun on King Richard, Couer de Lion), Mr. Ohnlandt, the manager in Sales (a pun on John Lackland), and Mr. Genjimori, the visiting representative from the Japanese company.

Of those entering the game, Marian is the first, and easiest, entry, involving the release of her program disk from her temporary andromech body (a tall and stunning black woman) and the downloading of her “person” into the Sherwood game:

“Put me in,” said Marian. “Let me deal with Robin on his own level. I’ll stop him from causing any further trouble for you.” “How?” She shrugged. “I’ll reform him.” “That never works with men,” Laurie objected. “*Cosmopolitan* says so.” “In that case I’ll stick to his tail so closely that when he lies down, I’ll hit the mattress before he does.” (Friesner 255)

Marian, who is very much invested—as is true to her belated programming—in the controlling of Robin Hood, has some tricks up her sleeve. Perceiving that the welfare of the child andromechs is the primary concern of her cohorts and creators, and fearing that any delay in the reformation of Robin Hood could prove disastrous, Maid Marian takes control of the game. She alters the automatic shut-off to her command alone and has changed the sense ratio (which controls how much pleasure or pain a player is able to feel) to 1:1. By the time Eddie and Laurie arrive at Robin Hood’s camp, and Carl arrives sometime later in the midst of Sherwood Forest, the Sherwood game, like Robin Hood, Maid Marian, and the child andromechs, is very real indeed.

Because Maid Marian and Laurie Pincus’s experience involves the rescue and resources of the child andromechs, Friesner’s text comes to recognize the significant relationship between women, children, and the making of stories. Christine Daae reminds us that:

The tellers of the tales were often the older women, passing on experience to the young, telling tales which outlined social functions and places, which saw the virtuous rewarded, and adversity overcome [. . .] while the voices of women were unheard politically, they were passing on knowledge to the young. (Daae 24)

In that Marian, Laurie, and the children all enter the game and enact powerful change both for themselves and against a corrupt system, Friesner’s text highlights the empowerment of women and children—a broader category than is usually included both in Howard Pyle’s and other, traditional Robin Hood retellings. Similarly, while Friesner’s retelling does include male disguise, as Friesner tells it, this is specifically a matter of choice and personal style and is not performed in order to gain entrance and acceptance into a man’s world. Rather, it is an internal impulse neither necessary nor prescriptive for inherent heroism.

For Maid Marian, the choice is compelling. She sheds her entire skin (in the form of the tall, black andromech body chosen for its preferment by the erring Robin Hood). Once within the game, Marian returns to her original programming and to a more traditional and expected form of Maid Marian: “Blond, blue-eyed, with skin like blush-stained ivory and a petite body slender and fragile as a river reed.

No vestige was left of the tall, healthy, dark-skinned beauty she'd been before" (Friesner 265). Maid Marian does not mind this change; in fact, she has engineered it. But her justification for doing so includes a verbal shrug, as if she is well aware both andromech shell and virtual visage are merely useful palettes, and it is the choosing that is much more significant than the choice. When Eddie remarks on Marian's changed appearance, she explains that it was not based on either his or Robin's preference. Marian states:

"It struck me that I'd do better to suit my appearance to this place, no matter how much I preferred my former looks. Which I didn't. That shell was chosen for me, with the specific purpose of making me more attractive to Robin. It was a choice beyond my control." (Friesner 266)

That Marian has opted for "a russet gown more suitable to the castle and the town than to the forest vastnesses" with "a golden fillet and veil adorn[ing] her head" (Friesner 265) only more firmly suggests Laurie's subsequent choice is one made for convenience and by personal preference.

Laurie is not inclined to forsake her femininity. Upon being shown to a computer terminal within the game (cleverly and compellingly concealed in the altar stone of a ruined abbey), Laurie selects for herself rugged gear that will stand up to the impending forest adventure:

Laurie shrugged and went back to typing. As she worked, the blue gown with its fancy tippets faded away, leaving her naked for an instant before new garb swam itself over her body and jelled into its final color and shape. Laurie stood up wearing a belted green wool tunic, brown hose and boots, and a rough gray cloak the color of cookfire smoke. A brown pouch hung from her belt, along with an empty wineskin. (Friesner 282)

Yet when Eddie notes that Laurie still has a wreath of flowers in her hair, a vestige of the game-imposed feminine clothing she had on earlier, it is clear both that she has forgotten to remove the wreath and that she wishes it to remain: "Laurie's hand flew to her brow and encountered the wreath still on her hair. 'Oh. May as well leave it'" (Friesner 282), thereby subverting her gender identity according to her own rules—not those of society.

Maid Marian, Laurie, and Eddie seek out Robin Hood and the Merry Men and arrive to find Robin has already incorporated the child andromechs into the

game. Robin explains how he was able to explore the Manifest system from the confines of the game and download the children's personalities, thereby saving them from the trauma of sexual predation. As a result, Laurie's primary concern is suddenly collapsed into her secondary concern to permanently reinstate Robin in the Sherwood game and to ensure the consistency of the game's programming. This allows Laurie to focus more steadily on Robin Hood and the swift punishment of the unjust and the immoral. True to her inherent heroism, she immediately announces her intentions:

"Laurie let out a whoop of joy that brought all movement in the glade to a dead halt. "What was the purpose of that?" Maid Marian demanded. "I think she just declared war on the Apaches," Eddie said" (Friesner 289).

But, though it is Laurie who declares war, it is Robin Hood who plans it—and who alters Laurie's appearance to suit that plan.

As befits the subversive spin on tradition in Esther Friesner's *The Sherwood Game*, a great altercation is to take place at the archery competition. Maid Marian is decidedly against it; the arrows are those of a computer-hacker and the target so many points on the World Wide Web. But Robin cannot resist the call to his skill and his ego. While Marian perceives this correctly as a setback to her goal of confining Robin's activity, Laurie is a prisoner of the game. Laurie can no more bring justice to the purveyors of the child andromech scheme than she can alter Marian's modifications to their virtual reality. Until the archery competition is resolved, Laurie happily joins the adventure, complaining only when Robin oversteps his boundaries and goes against her personal interests by completing her gesture at cross-dressing:

"He cut off my hair," Laurie grouched as the motley band passed beneath the portcullis of Nottingham Castle's great gate. "He cut off my *hair*." She tugged at the ragged ends that scarcely reached her earlobes. "He had to," Eddie whispered. "Otherwise you wouldn't fit in with the crowd. This way you look like a Saxon peasant boy" [. . .] "I think he did it on purpose," she went on as their group struggled through the crowd already present and took their places behind makeshift barricades [. . .] "lighten up; it's not like it's your real hair [. . .]." (Friesner 307-308)

Like the previous experiments with changing one's appearance, it is clear the subject of importance here is the exercising of choice. Laurie's complaint is

not that her hair has been cut to match the very outfit she has chosen for herself, but that Robin has decided upon the look. The cutting of Laurie's hair is but a practical application, and Eddie's comment that it is not her "real hair" does much to remind the audience that the freedom of choice is of utmost importance and that changes or modifications made in play, however successful their result, do not have to be permanent should they go against the player's wishes.

Nevertheless, the complete adoption of the traditional role of Maid Marian presages the final lesson in Laurie's experience. For it is Laurie who organizes the children in an attack against the Sheriff and his men when, to conclude the archery contest, a single, black-fletched arrow pierces Maid Marian's heart. Thus we have two very different experiential tales: the first tale, Laurie's, in which she learns to trust herself, to stand by her own convictions, and to value her freedom of choice; and the second tale, Maid Marian's, involving her frustration at trying to control Robin Hood and how doing so seems to cost her her (however virtual) life.

Laurie Pincus, the female hero in Esther Friesner's Robin Hood retelling, *The Sherwood Game*, is a highly successful hero. The benefits of her actions and experience span beyond her immediate community. Following the death of Maid Marian, Laurie organizes the revolt of child andromechs as well as their safe retreat, leaving Carl to battle Prince John (who appears for the first time in the game as the guise for Mr. Ohnlandt, the sales manager behind the child/sex toy scheme) while Robin Hood, fittingly, is preoccupied with the Sheriff of Nottingham. A masked warrior who reveals himself to be no other than Mr. Genjimori (the corporate executive from Japan) happily and conveniently aids Carl. King Richard (Regis Lyons, the founder and director of Manifest, Inc. whose "pardon" means the security of Laurie, Carl and Eddie's jobs), as befits tradition, also steps in for the conclusion of the game. Genjimori's and Lyons's presence ensures that they were not aware of the unauthorized use of the child andromechs as well as it promises the success of Laurie's heroism. In the end, Laurie restores her faith in herself, she saves the world from the sexual predators and pedophiles whose appetites will only grow and become more dangerous in the adult amusement park, and she finds peace and promise for the chil-

dren within the Sherwood game. What's more, and most befitting our desire for a happy ending, Laurie rescues Maid Marian from virtual death through the use of her intellectual talents by preserving Maid Marian's entity to a floppy disk. As she describes it, "[a]lways make a backup, *bubbaleh*" (Friesner 377), her use of Yiddish slang signaling Laurie's reinvestment in, and pride for, who she is.

Laurie's heroic character gives us much to celebrate in this forward-thinking retelling. For, while she disguises herself as a man to achieve heroic status, it has been done more for personal comfort than in a relegation of her gender; indeed, it is not a disguise put on to fool any of her male cohorts into treating her as an equal. Her male cohorts are aware and, especially in the case of Robin Hood, are participants in discovering *and maintaining* what cross-dressing reveals about Laurie's true, and heroic, self. Additionally, because Laurie's experience takes place in a virtual world, her return to our world does much to restate and affirm what she and the reader of this Friesner's retelling have already begun to learn: strength of character, a courageous heart, and the freedom of choice—not the clothes of traditional gender roles—are what makes a woman a hero. This is a lesson one can take away from Carl's Sherwood game in the very way we take it away from Friesner's *The Sherwood Game*. And it is a lesson that can be "relearned" each time the game is played, each time the novel is read.

Though the virtual Maid Marian's experience is cut short by an arrow, there remains much to celebrate in her tale, too. Given her "artificial" intelligence, Maid Marian's character is especially compelling as one who shares in the knowledge that Laurie gains. Marian's heroic experience is best seen as cyclical in nature and never-ending—even when she must, as she is destined to do, return to the Sherwood game. Maid Marian's experience serves to underscore Laurie's, encouragingly suggesting that no

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challenge is too great for the female hero—nor must it end in disappointment. Friesner's *The Sherwood Game* accomplishes what, in *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales*, Julius Heuscher has described as a gift of literature for the young reader. *The Sherwood Game* “nourishes [. . .] courage to widen [our] horizons and to tackle all the challenges successfully” (56). Though set in the future and involving the character development—both textual and plot-based—of artificial intelligence, in its use of the traditional Robin Hood legend, Friesner's Robin Hood retelling has much to offer Robin Hood studies and the young adult reader.

Those writers personally affected by the considerations of female characterization and potential heroism in their formative reading, and looking to their reading as an impetus in their own writing, may see the Robin Hood legend, traditionally described by Howard Pyle, as one that represents a repressive and limiting social role of woman. And they may see the cross-dressing female hero as a way out of that role. For women writers making good on Virginia Woolf's demands that women record their own lives special considerations of literary history apply. Will they, as Robin McKinley does in *The Outlaws of Sherwood*, be true to literary history and the traditional legend? Or (as is the case with Esther Friesner's *The Sherwood Game*), will they use time and technology to provide a liberating narrative overlay for readers of the Robin Hood legend? Kathleen McDonnell reminds us that:

People in the [television] industry contend the situation is dictated by the bottom line rather than sexism. Advertising revenues are based on the audience size and, in the words of one industry executive, ‘You have to have boys watching [. . .] for it to succeed. . . . It is well known that boys will watch a male lead and not a female lead. But girls are willing to watch a male lead.’ [. . .] This, in a nutshell, is the major obstacle to female-centred narrative: the perception that it's somehow not of general interest. That is, while we regard the male hero-story as the norm and expect girls and women to spend lifetimes watching stories built around male protagonists, we simply don't expect the same of boys and men. Female experience is still a side dish. (McDonnell 70)

Like McDonnell, I question a loyalty to tradition that demands that we continue to relegate girls and women to submissive and secondary roles in which “the problem resides in the enormous narrative imbalance. Stories have the power shape our view of reality. If girls rarely see stories that put female char-

acters at the center, how do we learn to see ourselves at the center of our own stories, of our lives?” (McDonnell 10). And this is not a concern for girls and women only. Additionally and similarly, we must ask: If developing readers rarely see stories that put female characters at the center, how do they learn to see women as equal partners, as heroes, as deserving of being at the center of their own stories and their own lives?

Happily, the answer is supplied by literary history: developing readers will learn to see everyone, including themselves, as a potential, central hero by reading through the continuum of legend and by engaging contemporary retellings. As they come into contact with legends and their retellings in our libraries and classrooms, and as they discuss their reading with us, young adult readers are introduced to their own heroic potentials and those of their peers.

It is possible to weave some of the above ideas (namely, an attention to the influences literature has on society, culture, and our lives) into a consideration of readings from the Robin Hood legend. I have found that legend—spanning hundreds of years and consistently reimagined and revised—paired with readings of contemporary retellings—allows students to appreciate the influences of our relationship to the mirroring and modeling among the rewards of literary history. Ultimately the study of legend, to include contemporary retellings, shows us our current demands on legend, our part in the development of literary history.

To help students articulate their findings, I designed a student questionnaire to be filled out once *before* students read an archaic or contemporary retelling of the Robin Hood legend, and once *after* their reading. These questionnaires function in a manner similar to in-class writing journals in that I use student comments to generate class discussion. I then ask students to consider what changes to their perceptions of the legend they have found in the archaic/contemporary retelling and what those changes suggest about contemporary attitudes through the option of a comparison/contrast essay.

The results are remarkable. Student engaged in the topic are surprised to learn that the medieval depiction of Robin Hood and his legend differs greatly from those of other periods. This allows me to help students question just what purpose those changes serve in the Robin Hood legend. I ask them,

“Why/How do you think those changes met/meet ‘contemporary’ audience demands?”

Their thoughtful comments result in lively class discussions on the many ways one might approach literature (as democratic as Robin Hood himself!) as a series of additions and developments. Considering the level of abstraction such discussions demand, and the necessary engagement of student intellect required, I take it as a measure of success when—as sometimes happens—a student reminds me that he or she was challenged by the reading and by the assignment².

As with most students’ comments, it is necessary to encourage any reaction. I find myself that same scholar, critic, and reteller when I endeavor to hear their wonderful insights (however clumsily they are sometimes articulated) and to return those insights to them as valuable and worthy of celebration. It is an elusive learning process and a fragile symbioticism. But the rewards of such a project and the benefits of those hard-worked class discussions are best identified as they culminate in the critical essays generated by these young scholars—the readers to which I am most frequently exposed. Among the multifaceted nature of literature and literary criticism, and the advantages the student reader/writer gains by a variety of readings, the findings that I celebrate the most in my students’ works describe the rich multiplicity of literature, the post-modern understanding that there never is just one side to a story, and that their readers (like themselves) are equally valid and valuable.

The most important act a teacher of legend and retelling can encourage is that of respectful and thoughtful balance—for this is a requirement in both scholarship and fiction. Practicing an appreciation for, and loyalty to, oneself as a critic and thinker, to the literary materials with which one is working, and to an audience, is a strenuous but rewarding task. Mindful of the intellectual and emotional benefits of such a practice, I would be neglecting this same task if I did not encourage the readers of this article to apply their individual creative geniuses to the use of retellings in the classroom. Therefore, I offer the above sketch as a possible guideline in the spirit of generosity and in the hope that, in return, I may receive other interpretations and considerations for the use of these literary materials.

Our mindful attention to, and presentation of, new and forward-thinking retellings is a non-interferential and positive way to counter consistent literary

limitations to a developing readers’ gendered, social development. The gifts of retellings of traditional narratives, such as McKinley’s *The Outlaws of Sherwood* and Friesner’s *The Sherwood Game*, are, happily, as individual and mutable as the characters themselves. In the texts’ assimilations of women, of male disguise, of the Robin Hood legend, and of social transgression, the character of the female hero is delightfully resistant and impervious to formula and pattern—however much she might be informed by tradition. Likewise, as recent literary criticism and literary production seem to assure us, by involving ourselves in these discussions in our reading and our classrooms, and continuing to draw attention to limitation in any manifestation, we further the liberating advances of the twentieth century. We are always in the process of forming new retellings of classic texts that nourish contemporary wisdom and awareness. What’s more, and as a direct result of our presentation of these retellings in our libraries and our schools, our readers are getting savvier, more demanding, and more heroic. It is up to us to provide readers, especially developing readers, with positive and forward-thinking texts, and with critical reading skills. But, having done so, it is finally up to them, *and we must leave it up to them*, to have the courage to use those skills, the intelligence to find the wisdom of the text and the heroism to use that wisdom, and the strength to demand, as well as create, new dimensions of that wisdom: new retellings.

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- 1 Other female-authored Robin Hood retellings include, most notably, Monica Furlong's *Robin's Country*, Theresa Tomlinson's *The Forestwife*, and Roberson's *Lady of the Forest*; male-authored retellings include Parke Godwin's *Sherwood* and *Robin and the King* (a sequel), and Michael Cadnum's *In a Dark Wood*. There are many others.
- 2 It is often a point of pride for students to admit to the challenge of retellings and literary history, and, as a result, they are eager to continue reading and testing retellings (of which there are so many! Indeed, I almost always point students in the direction of Robin McKinley's *Beauty*, *Rose Daughter*, *Deerskin*, and *Spindle's End*, and Gregory Maguire's *Wicked* and *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*).



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