



Childe Hood:  
The Infantilization of Medieval Legend

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**I**n *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, Stephen Knight offers a prime pattern for teaching Robin Hood. Knight lays out a detailed history and scrutinizes the generic, ideological and political dimensions of Robin Hood representations. I would like to share yet another pattern for bringing Robin Hood to the literature classroom. What I will attempt briefly here is to situate the Robin Hood legend within a particular historical construction of the medieval past, drawing on recent work in reception theory.<sup>1</sup> I will attend to what I regard as infantilization of the medieval past by eighteenth and nineteenth century literary scholars—their representation of medieval people and medieval literature as childish and/or childlike. I see a crucial relationship between such infantilization and the prominence of medieval legend in modern children’s literature. This relationship, I suggest, explains a striking generic collision between historical fiction and the *boys’ book* in Howard Pyle’s *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*.

Infantilization itself arose from a collision of sorts—a historical collision at the intersection of nationalism, the theory of evolution, and the common perception of old tales as the reading of childhood. Thomas Percy was one of the first eighteenth century antiquarians to ‘apologize’ for taking old ‘childish’

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poems seriously; he justified their usefulness by placing them within an evolutionary paradigm of progress. By arranging a collection of poems in chronological order, Percy intended to illustrate “the gradual improvements of the English language and poetry from the earliest ages down to the present” (I. 3). Use of an evolutionary model necessarily demotes earlier peoples—Percy calls them “gross and ignorant minds,”—or at best, in the nationalistic mode, renders them less highly developed versions of present learned, literary selves: the “old, simple bards,” though they lived in “rude, ignorant times” and used a “barbaric, unpolished language,” nevertheless composed truly English poems (as opposed to French derivatives) that “display great descriptive and inventive powers” (III. 340, 352, 354, 358, 363).

Percy’s condescending glance toward early literature paralleled a scholarly conception of the past as the nation’s childhood, an idea enabled by the logical extension of evolutionary thinking to history and also by the deep-seated feeling among learned men that the old tales were essentially children’s stories. Samuel Johnson explicitly linked childhood with the medieval past when he asserted that romances and legends are “children’s literature” because they come from a time when “learning was in its infancy” and people were “on the footing of children.” As Walter Scott put it, the tales of old show us “the National muse in her cradle” (in Johnston 33, 96).

This scientific, psychological, and nationalistic picture of a nation developing from a primitive

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childhood to an enlightened adulthood dignified antiquarian interest in ballads long considered cheap entertainment for children and the lower classes. Chapbooks, in which rewritings of early romances and ballads enjoyed prolonged popularity, were, as George Crabbe versifies, “the Peasant’s joys, when placed at ease,/ Half his delighted offspring mount his knees” (in Johnston 28).<sup>2</sup> According to Joseph Addison in No. 417 of *The Spectator*, the old medieval “Legends and Fables, [and] antiquated Romances” were the “Tradition of Nurses and Old Women,” the stories of childhood.

The ‘gentrifying’ of the material by such collectors as Percy and Joseph Ritson did not take the ballads out of the nursery; rather, it entrenched them anew in juvenility as writers utilized Percy’s and Ritson’s printed collections of medieval tales and the evolutionary concept of English history to write historical fiction.

American historical fiction in the late nineteenth century reveals how the notion of an infantile Middle Ages permeated fictional conceptions. Mark Twain’s 1889 novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, is a prime example of fictionalized evolutionary history that infantilizes the past. When Hank Morgan, a head superintendent in an arms factory, finds himself in a sixth century Malorian Camelot, he sees himself as a “man among children, a master intelligence among intellectual moles” who has been given the great opportunity to “sail in and grow up with the country” (54, 50). To Hank, King Arthur and his retinue are like babes in a nursery, “childlike and innocent,” ignorant

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and gullible (18). After a lifetime of contrasting their superstitions and simplicity to his nineteenth century scientific and mechanical knowledge, Hank finally brings the pinnacle of his civilization to the past—high-tech weaponry—and subsequently brings about mass destruction. The infantilization of the past then metamorphoses into a romanticization of the past, a self-reflexive move that regularly attended infantilization. By the end of the book, we find Hank back in his own century yearning for the purity and innocence of the medieval world—a world now figured in the image of a mother and child (his medieval family) and placed against an empty “civilized” nineteenth century.

Infantilized, romanticized history not only affected historical fiction; it also mutated into a primitivist view of childhood in a new genre brought forth by the burgeoning market of children’s literature. Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s 1869 *Story of a Bad Boy* was recognized by contemporaries as introducing a new generic paradigm: a *boys’ book*, in which a boys’ world is constructed “that is antagonistic to the world of adults” because boys are like ‘natural savages’—wild and uncivilized—who resist the constraining civilization of adulthood, its work and responsibility. Henry Cabot Lodge compared boys to primitives who lived during the “boyhood of the race.” Like *A Connecticut Yankee*, the boys’ book romanticizes an imagined ‘childhood’ and effects an “elegiac tone,” mourning the inevitable loss of boyhood “innocence,” a concept that subsumes the great

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*freedom* of a boy's life and the particular camaraderie of the boy-world, a group organized around its own rites and rituals distinct from those of adult authority (Crowley 385–87).

A boys' world invades Sherwood Forest in Howard Pyle's 1883 elegant and popular rendition of the Robin Hood legend for children, *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*. Knight notes that Pyle's *Robin Hood* followed upon a long succession of Robin Hood books written specifically for the children's market. He suggests that Pyle's book solidified Robin Hood as part of the heritage movement in English education, a movement that supplied a masculine, pastoral English past as the student's romanticized dose of history (201–7).

Although Pyle's medieval world is definitely a masculine one, its masculinity is that of schoolboys. Fusing the infantilization of the medieval past with the romanticization of childhood, Pyle enacts a 'primitive' boys' world in which Robin Hood and his men *become boys* whose freedom and merry savagery is antagonistic to an 'adult' world of work and organized violence. Here the medieval past becomes a nostalgic Peter-Pan fantasy world.<sup>3</sup>

Pyle's medieval escapism presents a psychological paradigm of romantic, free, fun-loving childhood that persistently opposes a somber, confining, and violent adulthood—a lush picture of innocent, boyish outlaws prevailing easily against the rage and cowardice of their cardboard cut-out adversaries. While the sheriff fumes,

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whines, and wheedles to ensnare Robin Hood, the “outlaws” laughingly use pranks and disguises to outwit him.<sup>4</sup>

Tricks are natural to this medieval past because it is a past that is *played*. In the preface, Pyle explicitly sets up history as a performance, as pageantry, a domain where historical characters may frolic like children; he announces that the reader will find “good, sober folks of real history so frisk and caper in gay colors and motley, that you would not know them but for the names tagged to them” (vii). His characters from history will enter in disguise, ready to play history as a child’s game for a child’s pleasure. The framed illustrations supplement this presentation of the legend: the decorative border around each picture gives the sensation that one is peering into another world that is set upon a stage. The same sets—Nottingham towers or Sherwood oaks—often fill out the backdrop.

Pyle welcomes the young reader to share in these merry delights and is quick to show serious “adult” readers the door:

You who so plod amid serious things that you feel it shame to give yourself up even for a few short moments to mirth and joyousness in the land of Fancy; you who think that life hath nought to do with innocent laughter that can harm no one; these pages are not for you. Clap to the leaves and go no farther than this... (vii)



Robin Hood meeteth the tall  
Stranger on the Bridge



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Adult readers are summarily dismissed from this boys' world in which adult characters, typecast as humorless bullies, make easy targets for the boys' tricks. However, in the prologue and epilogue, adults take on a more ominous role as villains who spur Robin's flight into the merry forest of childhood and then force his sad return to adulthood and civilization. In the prologue, Robin appears as a youth tripping merrily to Nottingham for an archery contest who is pulled up short by foresters who mock him severely for his youth. Using the issue of age as the medium for their maliciousness, they call him "little lad" and belittle his bow and arrows. The mocking continues in this vein: "Why, boy, thy mother's milk is yet scarce dry upon thy lips, and yet thou pratest of standing up with good stout men at Nottingham butts" (2).<sup>5</sup> Pyle represents an enmity not so much between oppressors and oppressed (the leitmotif of many Robin Hood texts) as between troublemaking adults (given to violence and greed), and merry-minded youth (given to sportsmanship and camaraderie). These adults force Robin to murder one of them and thus drive him into outlawry. The murder goes against the grain of his youthful goodness, making him sick at heart (4); as an outlaw, Robin diligently avoids use of deadly force, preferring pranks and equitable theft.

The conscious rejection of violence and rage, figured as adult traits, in favor of schoolboy sportsmanship appears explicitly in Robin's recruitment of Little John, an incident that rounds out the prologue. As in the seventeenth century ballad, Robin Hood and Little John



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meet on a bridge and challenge each other to a bout of quarterstaff. Laughing at his own ducking at Little John's hands, Robin proceeds to check John's rage with joviality at every step, re-training him to be a "merry man." When Will Scarlet jokes that this fellow called John Little should be renamed Little John, John becomes angry and threatens Will, but is told by Robin to "bottle thine anger" (9). By the time they have dragged Little John through a mock christening complete with pouring ale over his head, John has learned to be merry; "at first he was of a mind to be angry, but found he could not because the others were so merry; so he, too, laughed with the rest" (10). Here the metaphorical return to childhood has been made explicit; Little John is the "fair infant," the "bonny babe," whom the "merry boys" christen and clothe anew (9–10).<sup>6</sup> In similar fashion, a number of other adults who have been working for the authorities or who have simply been carrying out their trade desert their livelihoods at the drop of a hat to join Robin Upon his invitation to join, the tanner makes clear the contrast between merry outlawry and adult work: "Hey for a merry life! And hey for the life I love! Away with tanbark and filthy vats and foul cowhides!" (87). No sense of obligation to family or community appears to mar the easy and valued regression into the forest and childhood.

The description of the merry, boyish life in the woods runs like a refrain from the beginning to the end of the book. As the narrator and Robin tell us over and over:

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Right merrily they dwelt within the depths of Sherwood Forest, suffering neither care nor want, but passing the time in merry games of archery or bouts of cudgel play, living upon the King's venison, washed down with draughts of ale of October brewing" (1).

The realities of real work and real oppression are pushed into an idyllic background of this toy landscape for boys, a landscape characterized by the centrality of a school boy morality and masculinity. Women are rarely seen in the novel, and if seen not heard. Maid Marian appears as a mere thought of "bright eyes" in Robin's mind before he is outlawed and is then never heard of again (2). Other women are simply part of the scenery. "The voice of the busy housewife," for example, fills the air along with the "drowsy drone" of the bee and "the crow of a distant cock" (89). The wedding of Allan a Dale and Ellen becomes a boys' game of outwitting the bishop; Ellen only looks forlorn and happy by turns and never speaks (143–54). In general, feminine qualities are curtly checked and contrasted against the "manliness" of the boys. Robin is at first quite offended by the "dainty" walk and gestures of his nephew Will Gamwell (89–90).

As in the boys' book, idyllic youth in *Robin Hood* is gendered masculine. Homosocial camaraderie dominates, obscuring or even opposing conventional "adult" heterosexual relationships.<sup>7</sup> Women, as part of

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the adult world, are mere buxom lasses in the background; in the foreground the boys fight, love, kiss, and embrace one another in joyful, tearful reunions and partings. The dying Robin Hood lies in Little John's "loving arms" and his men send up "a great loud sound of wailing" (295). Using the homosocial potency of the boys' book, Pyle renders the medieval past and its child reader not only childlike but also misogynistic.

Adult enemies become a real threat again as the narrative approaches its conclusion, expelling Robin from the forest of innocence. The process begins when Robin is driven to commit a second murder by the hardened Guy of Gisborne. The epitome of violent authority—a hired murderer—Guy, wearing dead animals and a "thin cruel mouth," contrasts with the peaceful, mirthful Robin.<sup>8</sup> When Little John believes that Guy has killed Robin, he cries out at the disparity:

"who is there that hath not heard of thee and cursed thee for thy vile deeds of blood and rapine? Is it by such a hand as thine that the gentlest heart that ever beat is stilled in death?" (267)

Robin must kill the murderous outlaw or be killed, and so the obligations of adulthood commence, marked first by violence and then by the constricting machinations of authorities. In the next episode, King Richard, who can be as good a sport as Robin in the rough give-and-take of the forest games, pardons Robin on the condition that he go into the service of the king. When this seemingly

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innocuous agreement is made, Allan a Dale sings a song of death that foreshadows the end of Robin and his merry life in the forest (283–84). Robin then follows the king into years of war—the violent trope of adulthood (287).

The epilogue marks Robin’s definitive exit from merry childhood. In fact, the narrator offers a soft warning to his reader about the end of “merry doings”:

“I will not bid you follow me further... for that which comes hereafter speaks of the breaking up of things, and shows how joys and pleasures that are dead and gone can never be set upon their feet to walk again.” (289)

The epilogue then continues with the sense of loss that is characteristic of the boys’ book. In a prolonged scene of nostalgia, Robin returns from the wars after King Richard’s death and rides over his old stomping grounds, now quiet. He experiences a “great longing” for the old times that is met with the “wild cry of yearning, of joy, and yet of grief” of Little John and his other men who come running at the sound of his old horn (290–91). They mean to return to their old way of life but the attempt is short-lived; King John and the sheriff send troops of men to take them, and a changed Robin cannot simply hide until the danger is over:

Now had Robin Hood been as peaceful as of old,  
everything might have ended in smoke, as other

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such ventures had always done before; but he had fought for years under King Richard, and was changed from what he used to be. It galled his pride to thus flee away before those sent against him

and so Robin meets his enemies in a “bloody fight” (292). Though Robin and his men win the day, the change to violent adulthood has gone through to completion, and Robin dies soon after.

Pyle cements the link between the medieval past and childhood and in doing so, situates history and legend within the nineteenth century romanticization of childhood. Pyle’s Robin Hood helped establish the scholarly paradigm of progress in the popular imagination. That nationalistic, progressive view shaped the teaching of history in the nineteenth century and continues to shape history represented today by educators, writers, and film makers. In teaching the later manifestations of the Robin Hood legend, we can show students how the construction of readers and the construction of concepts in other venues of culture, such as the concept of evolution or the romanticized view of childhood, intersect to affect receptions of history and literature. For many students today, Robin Hood is still a child’s fanciful story and the Middle Ages are simply a time of thrilling boyhood adventures.

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### Notes

1. Reception theory allows one to recognize the interpretative filters that have been placed over our reception of the past by earlier constructors of history. It also recognizes changing audience expectations that make certain generic collisions possible, collisions which result in new conceptions of history in new generic forms. See Frantzen 22, 56, 59.
2. Crabbe did not separate his own childhood delight in reading the old legends from the peasant's children's delight; in another poem, he fondly remembers the days when he "Winged round the globe with Rowland or Sir Guy" (in Johnston 28).
3. Before Pyle's novel, English writers had linked the innocent, pastoral Robin Hood of the heritage movement to the idea of childhood. For example, to Leigh Hunt's 1820 *Ballads of Robin Hood* was appended the subtitle *For Children* in the second edition of 1855 (See Knight 159, 164–67). One can see that a self-reflexive motion underlies the notion that the yearning for a simple, non-urban past belongs to the idealized time of innocent, 'pre-civilized' childhood.
4. The sheriff is the prime example of the adult bully. Whether he is sending his gang to beat up one of Robin's outnumbered men, running away from Robin and his men, or gnawing his "nether lip" while Little John counts out his purse—"every clink of the bright money was a drop of blood from his veins"—the sheriff serves



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as the butt of all jokes, Pyle's moral exemplar of cowardice, "greed and guile" (36, 43, 55-56). King Henry is also portrayed as a poor sport; his wrath toward Robin for beating his foremost archers in a contest drives him to break his promise to the queen to pardon Robin Hood, instead chasing Robin all over the country. In contrast, when Robin wins he shares his grand prize with the king's archers and compliments their skill (229-34).

5. Like the foresters, the sheriff tries to take advantage of Robin's youth when Robin is in the disguise of a butcher-cum-spendthrift prodigal, but Robin exposes his deviousness: "thou, with thy gray hairs and one foot in the grave, wouldst trade upon the folly of a wild youth" (52).

6. The mock christening of Little John, the "pretty sweet babe" does occur in the ballad, but Pyle has added the frequent exchanges of John's angry fits and their corrective: Robin's side-splitting laughter (see Dobson 166-70).

7. The one adult heterosexual relationship that is dramatized in the novel is that of the king and queen, a relationship which proves almost fatal to Robin Hood.

8. Guy has heard that Robin "hath never let blood in his life, saving when he first came to the forest" (257-59).

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