The Forestwife Short Guide

The Forestwife by Theresa Tomlinson

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Contents

Overview

Tomlinson's The Forestwife is a compelling look at the Robin Hood legend and Robin Hood's England as told from Maid Marian's perspective. As such, The Forestwife is the female-centered quest narrative of Maid Marian (Mary de Holt); it is a story in which Mary breaks free of patriarchal constructs and rejects her arranged marriage, thereby discovering her innate heroism and self-definition. The Forestwife is a composite of the adventures of the Robin Hood tales and the harshness of medieval reality as well as a treatment of the humanity of the characters living in those times. It is a story of intrigue, of tragedy, of romance, and of much wisdom.

About the Author

The daughter of a vicar and a teacher, Theresa Tomlinson was raised in North Yorkshire, England. While as a child she had a strong desire to become a ballet dancer, she had no inclination to become a writer. Her parents, however, read to her and encouraged a love of books, and when Tomlinson had children of her own, she discovered that she enjoyed making picture books for them.

Her literary career began with stories inspired by the local history of North Yorkshire, and her novels are frequently set there. She writes about characters who have daily courage in the face of hardship, and her books generally feature strong female protagonists. Tomlinson's 1991 novel, Riding the Waves, and her 1998 novel, Meet Me by the Steelmen, were both shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal from the British Library Association.

Setting

The story is set in medieval England, where the natural environment, pestilence, and disease are as much adversaries as the politics of Richard I's reign. The survival of the people depends on their sense of community, on their personal strength, and on their understanding and appreciation of the healing power of nature. The Forestwife, a wise-woman of the healing arts (a "witch" of sorts) has a deep and powerful relationship with the green world. She possesses the ability, in perceptiveness as well as in her knowledge of herbal lore, to take care of the people seeking refuge in Sherwood Forest. In exchange, they provide her with security and protection from those whose fear and misunderstanding of the "witch" threaten both her personhood and her knowledge.

Social Sensitivity

The Forestwife is a novel that encourages young adult readers not only to achieve or to recognize female heroism, but to define all women as having a valued identity outside of male-defined social roles, apart from motherhood and wifedom.

Mary's quest becomes one to liberate her free will. Although her quest is an active choice, it is a negative one, a choice against her intended marriage—and it is best read in metaphorical terms: It is a quest of spirit.

If Mary desires to be free of patriarchal oppression (here, gendered definition and economic valuation and the denial of free will), she must put aside patriarchal definitions of herself (however useful). Thus it is that breaking away from both patriarchal oppression and definition—into the realm of free will and self-assertion—becomes a matter of spirit. As the elemental substance of Mary's story, her self-definition may be more metaphorical that traditional considerations of the quest narrative have allowed, yet significantly this does not preclude the value of her quest. In rejecting her arranged marriage, Mary, at once, defies being defined as a wife—in relation to a man only— and being reduced to an economic value by exerting power over her dowry. In establishing a female community, Mary further defies gendered social constructs, liberating her social conscious while engaging her free will. Ultimately, what Mary is tested against is herself, and the boon she receives.

In Mary's conception and creation of a female community, putting the female experience at the head and heart of her project, Tomlinson finds the set of relations made possible by female communities— very much not a matter of individual attributes. And, as Mary's experience involves the successful embrace of a female power role (although at the expense of her own sexual expression), putting her experience at the fore, she reveals a way in which we might begin to subvert and dismantle the notion that men—not women—are the bearers and definers of a universal personhood.

As Robin does not figure into Tomlinson's retelling in a primary way, the significant action of The Forestwife, because told from Mary's point of view, is the creation and survival of a female community, the ultimate valuing and centralizing of the female experience. As a result of the novel's predisposition, The Forestwife reads as a series of adventure tales (as does the Robin Hood legend itself), but it is important to note that, while Mary may impress Robin by the duties she performs in service to her community, and prove herself to him, this is merely an additional benefit—not her sole intention. Thus the "social sensitivities" of Theresa Tomlinson's The Forestwife are sure to strike the reader as a wonderful and respectful treatment of the "original" tales as well as a promising new direction for contemporary Robin Hood retellings informed by feminist theory.

Literary Qualities

One cannot consider a present-day Robin Hood retelling without first considering the immense popularity and influence that Howard Pyle's 1883 retelling, The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood (please see separate entry) has enjoyed. For those writers who follow Howard Pyle, and are subsequently influenced by his work, his work (which pointedly leaves out the character of Maid Marian) has been problematic—especially for modern women writers who are interested in the legend of Robin Hood, the young adult audience, and in current notions of female heroism such as we have in the writing of Robin McKinley and Theresa Tomlinson.

Accordingly, McKinley's The Outlaws of Sherwood (1988) characterizes Maid Marian not only in relationship to men but in partnership with them. While this is a welcome change of pace, a relief, to the contemporary reader of the Robin Hood legend, it still falls short of achieving the femalecentered narrative so needed by the formative reader who reads to learn what social roles are available to women and to develop a subsequent world view. In the case of McKinley's retelling, the title does not promise a female-centered narrative, and so it is perhaps unfair to hold her (like Pyle) to this kind of scrutiny. Nevertheless, as one of the first Robin Hood retellings authored by a woman, our hopes for The Outlaws of Sherwood include the rectification of this literary lopsidedness. That McKinley's Maid Marian is significantly an individual is important.

She is active, witty, smart and genuine— and an old and good friend to Robin. It is this characterization that allows Marian credibly to pursue her heroic potential in the text and to play a role as vital and valuable as the other legendary characters. This liberation of Marian's character is no less significant—truly, much more so—for McKinley's references and stated indebtedness to Howard Pyle, with whose Robin Hood McKinley "grew up." Thus, in McKinley we have a woman author who has chosen to go against flat ideology, tradition, and psycho-literary training in order to deliver a female character with heroic potential.

Happily, the character of Maid Marian as constructed by Theresa Tomlinson in The Forestwife offers a more exciting and viable alternative by providing a femalecentered narrative. Though Tomlinson refers to The Forestwife as "a strange mixture of ideas from the earliest Robin Hood stories, links with my own locality, life at the time of Richard I, and my interest in women's history," (as a way, perhaps, to excuse its loose connection with the Robin Hood ballads), she defends her methods in terms of the feminist-inspired right to (re-)appropriation, explaining, "I thoroughly enjoyed the writing of this story and I admit that I took whatever interested me, and ignored whatever I disliked." This strikes me as a truly progressive attitude, exemplifying the interesting developments in female-centered narratives made possible by twentieth-century feminism (and especially useful for contemporary retellings). It demonstrates the way in which we may use good storytelling to reverse—even transcend—negative psycho-literary effects on the formative reader.

Themes and Characters

Tomlinson's Maid Marian, born Mary de Holt, orphaned at a young age and reared by her cruel and tyrannical uncle, Lord Everett de Holt, has been promised in marriage to Gerard de Broat, an old man whom she does not love. Mary and her nursemaid Agnes arrive in Sherwood Forest, escaping from a life they can no longer bear. They hope to seek refuge with the Forestwife, only to find her dead. Although the Forestwife has died, the role of the Forestwife (and the need for her) has not. So it is that Agnes assumes the mantle of healer. This begins Mary's apprenticeship in the art of herbal healing and caring for others. The reader watches as an ignorant, naive, frightened, and somewhat selfish girl running away from an oppressive patriarchy becomes Marian the Green Lady of the Woods and finally—as her own nursemaid did—takes on the role of the Forestwife. Along the way we meet many other characters facing many trials.

At the center of the novel stands Mary de Holt, a strong and resourceful Marian who represents the real concerns of medieval women, living in a raw world of nature and the fierceness of their time. And at the core of her story is the idea of the female community deep within Sherwood. Apprentice to the Forestwife, a sort of Green Lady archetype (meaning an herbalist and wisewoman who serves the people—a role which Mary, as apprentice, is destined to achieve), Mary befriends a community of nuns who are first suppressed and then abandoned and forgotten by a secular (monastic) hierarchy. As those forgotten, left to themselves, the nuns thrive. It is only when they are remembered and imprisoned for their lack of obedience and submission that Mary plots to release them and to bring them into her holding. The nuns join the Forestwife's immediate community, consisting of Mary, her nurse Agnes, various other "forgotten" women (an unwed mother, a female outlaw, a senile old woman)—as well as Brother James (Tomlinson's Friar Tuck), the boy Tom, and the sometime visitors Little John and Robert —Robin Hood, who, as Agnes' son, is a departure only from the Victorianinspired tradition of Robin Hood as nobleman and is, consequently, a return to an earlier (medieval) characterization. Mary becomes devoted to ensuring their safety and in providing for all their needs.

Not coincidentally, Theresa Tomlinson's The Forestwife, focusing as it does on the strength and power of women and female communities, does not conclude with a pardon from the Lionheart. Instead, and more like a prequel to the Robin Hood legend than a reworking of it, The Forestwife concludes as Rob first stumbles upon the idea of stealing the King's ransom, thereby making his path for the future quite clear, while Mary chooses to continue in her new role of female inheritance, as the Forestwife. Their choices, which ultimately disallow a marriage of sorts, certainly rule out child-rearing and social conformity, nevertheless giving their lives' paths equal value and significance. They do have the option of a sexual relationship (indeed, their chances at such are explained as a potential, continuing part of the May rites), but Mary's sexual relationship to a man does not render individual accomplishments and life's work secondary.

Topics for Discussion

1. Is Theresa Tomlinson's The Forestwife a retelling of the Robin Hood legend or a prequel to the Robin Hood legend?

What is a retelling? What is a prequel?

2. There is much "adult" material in the novel (including rape and murder). So why is Theresa Tomlinson's The Forestwife considered a young adult novel? Is it because it is short? Because it is easy to read? Or because there is little sexual activity shown between characters?

How does your answer to these questions take into account the adult material that is in the novel? What age should the reader of The Forestwife be?

3. How does Theresa Tomlinson's The Forestwife compare with other versions of the Robin Hood legend? What do you like better about it? Or worse?

4. If there is no original author of the Robin Hood legend—or primary text of the Robin Hood legend—to whom does the legend belong? Does this lack of ownership mean there are no "rules" when rewriting the legend? What would your own rules for the Robin Hood legend be?

5. If you were to typecast Theresa Tomlinson's The Forestwife with people from your own life, who would you cast and why? Do those specific people play those specific characters because they fulfill that role in your life or because their personality resembles the character? What is the relationship between social role and personality anyway?

6. For the most part, the characters who come to the Forestwife for medical assistance trust her wisdom and knowledge. Do we feel the same way about doctors today?

7. Does the novel suggest that a woman must sacrifice a sexual life in order to have a professional life? How does Mary's negotiation of such choices reflect what she has learned throughout the novel?

8. Mary is told that "there are many different kinds of love." What does this mean? Do you agree?

9. What might we learn about female heroism and female outlawry from The Forestwife? Is this any different from the male heroism and outlawry we find elsewhere in the Robin Hood legend?

10. Even though Mary establishes a female community with female power, it is based on a patriarchal model. What are the differences and the similarities?

What other models for female communities are available and appropriate?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the role (and idea) of the witch.

Compare and contrast the role of the witch with that of the Forestwife.

2. Does Mary change as the novel progresses? What experiences does she have that may have changed her?

3. Theresa Tomlinson spends a long time describing how Mary and the others will trap the deer. Is this description accurate? What research into hunting (or personal experience with hunting) helps you to know that?

4. At both the opening and in the conclusion of The Forestwife Mary makes a choice against marriage. Even though the choices are the same, they are made for very different reasons? What are those reasons?

5. Do some research into the lifestyle and expectations of nuns and abbeys. Do the nuns of today still live and practice the same way they did in Richard I's England?

6. What were the Crusades all about anyway? Do they parallel any of the characters' plight(s) in The Forestwife? Whose?

7. Theresa Tomlinson set her novel in medieval England. What did she have to learn about the middle ages and English history for her story? Point out where what Tomlinson knows has direct bearing on the text.

8. Compare The Forestwife with another Robin Hood retelling. How much does the time period of the retelling have to do with the way it imagines the Robin Hood legend?

9. Walter Scott's Ivanhoe is also set in the "greenwood" of an idyllic England.

Compare and contrast Ivanhoe with The Forestwife.

10. Is Theresa Tomlinson a feminist? Find those places in the text that support your claim either way.

For Further Reference

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Cantor, Norman F. Inventing the Middle Ages.

New York: Quill William Morrow, 1991.

Considers the "invention" of the Middle Ages—and subsequent depictions—by the most prominent scholars and fictionwriters of the twentieth century.

Carpenter, Kevin. Robin Hood: The Many Faces of that Celebrated English Outlaw.

Oldenburg: Oldenburg University Press, 1995. A collection of the better and more substantive critical examinations of the legend of Robin Hood.

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Hole, Christina. English Folk Heroes. London: B. T. Batsford, 1948. An examination of the tales and reputations of the best beloved folk-heroes in British literary history, including Robin Hood.

Holt, J. C. Robin Hood. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1982. One of the first lengthy critical investigations of the Robin Hood legend and largely responsible for renewed academic interest in Robin Hood studies.

Hook, Sidney. The Heroin History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility. New York: Humanities Press, 1943. An overview of literary heroism which takes both the work of Joseph Campbell and the Robin Hood legend into account.

Keen, Maurice. The Outlaws of Medieval Legend. Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1977. A veritable source book for the student of medieval literature with an entire section devoted to Robin Hood.

Lubin, Harold. Heroes and Anti-Heroes. San Francisco: Chandler, 1968. A definition of both the hero and the antihero through the methods of comparison and contrast offering a compelling approach to the definition of Robin Hood's character.

Raglan, Lord. The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama. New York: Vintage Books, 1956. Predating (and informing) Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Raglan's text remains an invaluable contribution to the study of the hero in literature.

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Two volumes. London: Extant, 1820. The first collection devoted exclusively to the Robin Hood ballads and the manner by which (like F. J. Child) the ballads continue to be dated.

Sullivan, C. W. III. "Traditional Ballads and Modern Children's Fantasy: Some Comments on Structure and Intent." Children's Literature Quarterly 11, 3 (1986): 145-147. An article investigating the retelling of folk and fairy tales for children by the editor of the Children's Folklore Review.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Readers of Theresa Tomlinson's The Forestwife will most likely be interested in other twentieth-century retellings of the Robin Hood legend. These include: Esther Friesner's 1995 The Sherwood Game (in which characters from a computer game are "brought to life"); Parke Godwin's Robin and the King (1993) and Sherwood (1991), both of which are rich in historical research and reference; Jennifer Roberson's Lady of the Forest: A Novel of Sherwood (1992), which focuses more on Maid Marian but is narrated from several perspectives; and—as mentioned earlier—Robin McKinley's The Outlaws of Sherwood, as well as Howard Pyle's highly influential The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood.

Those readers interested in Robin Hood retellings of other eras should be first referred to the most influential and the best loved; among these are: Pierce Egan the Younger's Robin Hood and Little John: or, The Merry Men of Sherwood Forest (1850), Thomas Love Peacock's Maid Marian (1895), Sir Walter Scott's Ivanhoe (1890), and Alfred Tennyson's play The Foresters, Robin Hood and Maid Marian (1892).

Just as the Robin Hood legend has inspired more textual retellings than one would care to count, so too has it inspired several cinematic adaptations—from Errol Flynn's to Douglas Fairbanks' to Patrick Bergin's to Kevin Costner's interpretations of the title character to Disney's depiction of Robin Hood's legend as a beast fable of sorts. There is, to the best of my knowledge, no cinematic/video adaptation of Theresa Tomlinson's The Forestzvife, as compelling and promising as such an adaptation seems.

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