

PUPPETS AS TELLERS OF TALES:

Why and How to Use Traditional Stories

Marvis Jean Canon

Twenty-five years ago as a new English teacher I was surprised to observe that some of my bright Minneapolis suburban high school students had a good sense of story while others with equal ability approached literature mechanically and with little interest. Since then as a teacher, librarian, and parent I have become convinced that young children need the authority of a storyteller and the security of the structured folktale to build an understanding of literature of the past and also to develop a basis for coping with less structured contemporary literature.

Folktales have been an important part of the heritage of every country. Survival alone indicates their significance for people everywhere. This is an excellent starting point for introducing literature of all kinds. The framework shows a child story development. Realistic and imaginative elements which will reappear in all of his future reading can also be found in the tale. The ageless quality of the folktale has such appeal that entire classes frequently respond with applause.

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I had originally assumed that most children would know what I considered to be old favorites. I now know that not only "Rumpelstiltskin" or "Rapunzel" get children to ask, "Where do you find such good stories?" but "Red Riding Hood" in its original form is often not known. What has happened to the story tradition?

As Heinrich Boll said in his *Irish Journal*, "Folklore is something like innocence; when you know you have it, you no longer have it."¹ Perhaps this is what has happened to our American culture. Too often traditional traits, whether in crafts or in storytelling, have been commercially exploited and the real traditions lost in the process. Cartoons, television, movies, and cheap fiction have taken themes and characters from traditional stories and changed them to suit popular demand for the sensational or the sentimental. It would seem that authentic tales would soon disappear, leaving today's child only with distortions of tradition.

In addition to helping a child become aware of cultural traditions and the themes and structure of literature, the tale is also significant in developing an understanding of his/her own personality. This important aspect is discussed in Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*.² Bettelheim believes that adults should become aware of the importance of fairytales in exposing young children to the virtues of good and evil in a setting that is future oriented. He warns, however, against explaining to the child why any story is so enchanting. It is this special quality of illusive enchantment that becomes the best teacher and permits a young child to develop his own reasoning. It is an independent experience without need of a didactic and moralistic adult who is trying to teach him the ways of the world.

Puppets and Folklore

Recently efforts have been made to counteract the disappearance of traditional stories. Artists preserve specific tales through illustrating children's books. Traditional storytellers and puppeteers are again appearing in many United States towns and cities. International arts festivals feature life-sized street puppets as well as stage performances. The International Puppet Festival, which was held for the first time in the United States in Washington D.C., was given nationwide publicity on the PBS television presentation, "Here Come the Puppets." While the popular Muppets chief puppet, Kermit, does little to further traditional storytelling, he is becoming a classic bit of folklore in his own right. Puppetry for adults is also coming to the American scene through such companies as the Rose and Thorn Puppet Theater, the Pangolin Puppets, and the Heart of

the Beast Puppet Theater in Minneapolis.³ These companies, in the tradition of the ancient Egyptians, American Hopi Indians, and Orientals, consider puppetry a serious art form.

While these special groups provide an increasing audience with the best in oral tradition, countless other non-professional puppeteers are performing as well. *The Puppetry in Education News*⁴ of San Francisco reports bi-monthly many school and community involvements. Nevertheless, most children will not benefit from traditional puppetry, or even hear folktales, unless librarians realize the value of folklore.

Developing a systematic plan for presenting folktales is not as complicated as it may seem because of the number of books available in most school libraries. And once an overall plan is outlined, the next step is incorporating a puppetry program. The plan should begin with a basic tale selection following examples from all folktale types. Charlotte Huck's chapter on traditional literature in her *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*⁵ makes a plan for systematic coverage easy. During our library storytime, I introduce all types of international tales to children in the nursery classes through the third grade. By the fourth grade, children are ready to participate in a puppetry program with an appreciation for folktales.

Familiarity with the best known tales will be a starting point for the puppet program because each puppeteer and each child in the audience can relate to the story. Then everyone can evaluate the humor of the interpretation and changes in story by plan or mistake. Careful organization is necessary for a puppet program for enthusiasm and growth to be guaranteed. The demands for participation can make any librarian want to flee unless certain decisions are made in advance.

The complexity of the many craft books on puppet making, equipment, and techniques can confuse anyone who does not have the creative ability to decide what is possible for his or her school. The craft approach also can distract from the purpose of presenting a simple tale. It is easier to use the storyteller approach with careful selection of tales for story hour puppet shows.

A wide variety of characters, plots, and motifs should be considered in selection. Folktale characters are stereotypic and, therefore, suitable for puppets who cannot change a happy or fierce expression. The qualities of good and evil become a basis for understanding more complex characters in literature. Folktale plots are simple and direct. Conclusions come quickly and provide good action stories for puppetry. Special motifs involving magic, trickery, and transformation have great appeal for children.

Select about twenty tales representing characters, plots, and motifs from the four basic folktale categories for starting a first year puppet program. Having a choice is important for children. Our University School fourth, fifth, and sixth graders presented the following basic tales as a first, and very successful, year: THE CUMULATIVE OR FORMULA TALE: "Gingerbread Boy," Henny Penny," and "Old Woman and Her Pig." ANIMAL TALES: "Three Billy Goats Gruff," "Little Red Hen," "Bremontown Musicians," "Who's in the Rabbit House," *Aesop's Fables*—"Rabbit and the Tortoise" and "Lion and the Mouse." JOKES AND ANECDOTES, NUMB-SKULL TALES: "Lazy Jack," "Get up and Shut the Door," "Clever Elsie." ORDINARY TALES WITH SPECIAL MOTIFS: "Jack and the Beanstalk" (giant killers), "Red Riding Hood" (monster), "Rapunzel" (captivity), "Tinder Box" (magic object), "Rumpelstiltskin" (supernatural helper), "Frog Prince" (transformation), "Stone Soup" (trickery), "Snow White and Rose Red" (transformation).

Writing Puppet Plays

As a further expansion of the program, children have also written original scripts, which generally have folk motifs, and presented literary tales such as Wanda Gag's *Funny Thing* and James Thurber's *Great Quillow*.⁶

After basic tales are chosen for production, the question of obtaining scripts surfaces. While it is true that many folktales should be in any children's library, the fact remains that actual scripts are limited. Some plays are available, of course, but most are either too complex, have distorted versions of the traditional story, or are out of print. Play books such as *Dramatized Folktales of the World*, a collection of fifty non-royalty one act plays of story adaptations, is still in print, but is not primarily designed for puppetry. The following plays, however, from that collection are usable: "The Musicians of Bremontown" (German), "One Wish Too Many" (Holland), "Peter and The Wolf" (Russian), "Stone Soup" (Russian), and "Stolen Tarts" (England).⁷

During my futile search, I located many scripts in the St. Paul, Minnesota, Public Library which have been collected from years of successful productions. Seeing these adaptations gave me the incentive to begin adapting tales.

In deciding which tales to adapt, one must check stories for short conversational dialogue. Descriptive and narrative paragraphs should be suitable for a child who can use a puppet as a narrator in

front of the stage. This serves as a fill-in between conversation parts much like the Mr. Interlocketer of the old minstrel shows, and has become a choice role.

Unless one has read a great number of tales, judging authenticity can be difficult. I have found two basic adaptable and accurate collections of tales suitable for puppetry to be Wanda Gag's *Tales from Grimm*⁸ and *More Tales from Grimm*⁹ (still in print from Coward). Her rare combination of authenticity and simplification of language has not become dated even though it was written decades ago. Wanda Gag remains one of the best storytellers for children.

The most impressive contributions to the preservation of the folktale today are the numerous individual books of illustrated tales. Of all the current author/illustrators who can serve the puppeteer, I believe the Zemachs are among the best. *Nail Soup*¹⁰ and *The Three Sillies*,¹¹ for example, make excellent productions. Every year new books appear which offer excellent puppet show potentials. Anne Pellowski's Polish story, *The Nine Crying Dolls*, is a valuable new tale.

The Ready to Read series by Macmillan now includes folktales such as *Wiley and the Hairy Man*.¹³ These renditions are simply written and can be done by the youngest puppeteer.

Stith Thompson, the noted folklorist, has published one of the best collections of tales as a source for an expanding program. *One Hundred Favorite Folktales*.¹⁴ available now in paperback, contains tales from Ireland to India and is written with much dialogue.

When a script is ready, tack it to the inside of the stage on hooks. Even though the puppeteer will probably know most of the lines after a few rehearsals, I encourage following the script to keep the flavor of the tale's origin. Occasional ad libs, however, should not be discouraged. In fact, one of the most important aspects of the program is the casual attitude of the adult involved. No performance can be a failure if it contains the element of enchantment; all works into the fabric of weaving a tale.

Along with the selection of scripts must come the collection of a cast of puppets. About fifteen animals and an equal number of characters can be purchased to cover most basic needs. While most department stores have limited puppet selections, many ordering sources are listed in Nancy Renfro's *A Puppet Corner in Every Library*.¹⁵ This book is also one of the best sources for answering the basic questions of puppetry.

Props and scenery can be left entirely to the children for each production. Illustrations on wide sheets of paper take care of any needed publicity or scenery. With a storytelling emphasis, the imagination dominates since traditional storytellers use no props. Obviously a stage is needed. I recommend beginning with three sides of a tall

box or packing crate. Eventually you should be able to acquire a portable stage. Many designs are available and are discussed in Renfro's book.

Play Practice

A few words must be said about rehearsals. Most of the plays can be presented in five to ten minutes. Longer tales should only be done by children who have had previous experience. Given the duplicated scripts, children are eager to practice the plays and can initially rehearse alone. Most stories require few rehearsals with a supervisor. The directed rehearsal need only point out basic speaking problems and puppet actions. A structured tale and script provides guidance in itself. However, all children need some supervision. With one year of special effort on the part of a librarian, I believe adults will become interested in supervising and also in expanding a collection of puppets.

Each time a play is performed it gets better. Enthusiastic audiences are a great encouragement for continuing the program. Audiences are not hard to find in any school, but a scheduled library storytime or part of a summer reading program are logical times for repeated performances. Children do want to perform for wider audiences. Eventually they will want to participate in special programs. Plans for a puppet festival should be considered. But my recommendation remains: keep it basic and simple. With the guaranteed success of the old tales, not much can go wrong.

When at the end of your first year of puppet shows, the shy child corners you and says, "When do I get to do it?" and a group of sixth grade boys, who earlier pretended not to care, approach you and insist on having their turn, you will know it was worth it!

Notes

¹ Boll, Heinrich. *Irish Journal*. Lelia Vennewitz, trans. New York: McGraw, 1967.

² Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

³ Steele, Mike. "Twin Cities Puppetry is Not Kid Stuff" *Minneapolis Tribune, Picture Section*. January 25, 1981, 6-9.

⁴ *Puppetry in Education News*, 164 27th Street. San Francisco, CA 94110.

⁵ Huck, Charlotte S. "Traditional Literature," *Children's Literature In the Elementary School*. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston. 1976.

⁶ See Gag, Wanda. *The Funny Thing*. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1929 and Thurber, James. *The Great Quillow*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1944.

⁷ Kamerman, Sylvia, ed. *Dramatized Folk Tales of the World*. Boston: Plays, Inc. 1971.

⁸ Gag, Wanda. *Tales from Grimm*. New York: Coward, 1936.

⁹ Gag, Wanda. *More Tales from Grimm*. New York: Coward, 1947.

¹⁰ Zemach, Harve. *Nail Soup*. Chicago: Follett, 1964.

¹¹ Zemach, Margot. *The Three Sillies*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1963.

¹² Pellowski, Anne. *The Nine Crying Dolls*. Philomel Books in cooperation with U. S. Committee for UNICEF. New York: Putnam, 1980.

¹³ Bang, Molly. *Wiley and the Hairy Man*, adapted from an American folk tale. New York: Macmillan, 1976.

¹⁴ Thompson, Stith. *One Hundred Favorite Folktales*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1975.

¹⁵ Renfro, Nancy. *Puppet Corner in Every Library*. Austin, Texas: Nancy Renfro Studios. 1978.

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