

## Gender Relationships in Translating Literature for Children

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**Résumé :** *Notre travail vise à démontrer que la traduction de la littérature pour les enfants développe une vraie relation plus ou moins évidente avec les études de genre. Pour y parvenir, l'accent est mis sur: l'état de la littérature pour les enfants et sa traduction qui a été semblable à celui de la littérature féminine, la même position marginale dans le polysystème littéraire; la plupart des livres pour les enfants ont été signés par des femmes; un sous-genre de la littérature pour les enfants est la fiction narrative pour les filles qui donnent certaines fonctionnalités aux livres dans cette catégorie; la plupart des traducteurs de la littérature pour les enfants sont des femmes et les théoriciens des études de traduction dans la littérature pour les enfants aussi. En plus, le processus de traduction lui-même traite de certaines questions spécifiques aux études de genre: les concepts d'autorité et de responsabilité, les différences grammaticales, l'appropriation de la violence, la médiation culturelle ou les relations de pouvoir. Enfin, en explorant l'échange mutuel de livres pour les enfants entre la langue et la culture roumaine et la langue et la culture anglaise, l'oeuvre souligne que la recherche en ce qui concerne la littérature pour les enfants de la perspective du genre éclaire le processus de production et réception des traductions littéraires pour les enfants.*

**Mots-clés:** *la position marginale, l'attitude patriarcale, les stratégies de traduction*

In a survey of the theoretical approaches to translation, we cannot overlook the influence of gender studies. To support this idea, Munday [1] acknowledges Simon's contribution to an understanding of translation from a gender-studies angle. She sees a language of sexism in translation studies, with its images of dominance, fidelity, faithfulness and betrayal. On a larger scale, the feminist theorists see a parallel between the status of translation, which is often considered to be derivative and inferior to original writing, and that of women, so often repressed in society and literature. This is in fact the core of feminist translation theory, which seeks to “identify and critique the tangle of concepts which relegates both women and translation to the bottom of the social and literary ladder” [2]. But Simon takes this further in the concept of the committed translation project to which feminist translation is supposed to be faithful.

Translation for children is being related to gender studies due to multiple reasons: the status of children's literature and implicitly of its translation has been similar to that of women's literature, having the same marginal position within the literary polysystem; most of the children's books were signed by women writers; a sub-genre of children's literature is represented by narrative fiction for girls which bestows certain characteristics upon the books included in this category; the majority of the translators of children's literature are women and last but not least, the theorists of CLTS are mainly women too. In the following pages, I shall garner evidence in support of all these reasons.

First of all, the tendency to regard children's literature as “the Cinderella of literary studies” [3] is understandable in the sense that it kept remaining “uncanonical and culturally marginalised” [4]. Being written for a minority, children's books have shared a similar status with women's literature. Both types of literature have been considered peripheral and treated as such in many cultural systems.

An important aspect stressed by Hunt [5] refers to the fact that the conventional literary system, reflecting the values of the traditional hierarchical family system, has a predisposition to undervalue women's writing whereas children's literature is treated even worse as it concerns children primarily and is likely to be seen as the domain of women – whether mothers or teachers.

Drawing a parallel between the emergence of children's literature and other kinds of literature (national, ethnic, feminist, post-colonial), Hunt argued that: “Just as the literatures

of colonial countries have had to fight against a dominant culture, so children's literature (as a concept) has had to fight against the academic hegemony of 'Eng. Lit' to gain any recognition. Just as colonised countries have adopted a paternalistic stance towards the 'natives' and a patronising stance to their writings, so, within what seems to be a single culture, the same attitude has been taken to children's literature books" [6].

Secondly, the evaluation of children's literature as being an inferior part of the literary polysystem also lies in the fact that books for children do not always comply with conventional literary norms and raise questions regarding conventional evaluation and classification. Often considered formulaic or stereotypical, books for children could display recurrent patterns in terms of structure, character and language. From my perspective, this is not a viable argument to prove the inferiority of children's literature. Text typology is extremely diverse in children's literature and each age group has its own characteristics hence children of different ages have their own abilities to read and comprehend literary texts which lead to a certain writing style and translation requirements. Unfortunately, O'Connell is perfectly right when she stipulates: "If the genre itself is not held in very high esteem by the world of scholarship, it is not highly surprising that the authors of books for children often suffer from problems of poor status and low pay" [7].

The position of children's literature in the literary polysystem has influenced and established a low status for the translation of literature for children as well.

If its very source material is considered of marginal interest and the professional activity carried out on this material is undervalued then it is no wonder that the potential of translating literature for children has been underestimated. O'Connell warns against the implications generated by the rates of pay and conditions offered to literary translators and the minimal formal acknowledgement of the translator's contribution on the cover or elsewhere in a translated work: "Poor status, pay and working conditions can perpetuate a vicious circle in which publishers are often presented with what they deserve, namely, translated work which could be a good deal better" [8].

My concern here is to pinpoint to the causes of such a situation and to emphasise some solutions to the problem. Breaking the above-mentioned "vicious cycle" would require the training of professional translators, real experts in CLT. This has not been possible so far partly because of the academic institutions and their position towards the necessity to offer students undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the field of CLT. Their attitude has undoubtedly contributed to this problem of poor public perception and low status.

On the other hand, the academic world alone is not responsible for the so-long perpetuated state of CLT. Editors and publishers play an active role in the field too. After all, the selection of the books to be published rests with the publishing houses. In Romania, things have changed after the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1989. The monopoly of "Ion Creangă" Publishing House over the literature for young people has been replaced with the emergence of the new private publishing houses for children such as "Tineretului" or "Cartea Copiilor" Publishing Houses. In addition, the most influential Romanian publishing houses after 1989 (Humanitas, Corint, Nemira, Teora, All, Paralela 45, RAO etc.) have resorted to collections dedicated to children and youth literature. Republishing Romanian and foreign authors for children and diversifying the typology of books for children published in Romania have represented a major step forward for the Romanian book market addressing this segment of TRs.

By contrast, the present situation of translated children's books in Romania shadows the courageous initiatives of the first years after the Romanian revolution. Translated books from authors of English expression by far exceed the writing and publishing of original autochthon books for children not to mention the scarcity of translations of such books.

In CLTS, gender could become an important matter since many of the issues related to gender studies could be applied to the translation of children's literature: the problems of authority and responsibility, challenging grammatical gender, the violence of appropriation, cultural mediators or translating relationships.

For Chamberlain, metaphors of gender reveal something of the politics of translation: "They reveal an anxiety about origins and originality, and a power struggle over the meaning of difference" [9]. Indeed, translating literature for children has always involved a rather controversial enterprise due to the status of children's literature in the literary polysystem and the status of CLT within the larger context of Translation Studies.

Perhaps in search of a sanctuary in a male dominated society, women have started writing books for children, somehow confirming their alleged role as mothers and teachers of the young generation. Famous authors for children used to be and still are women and an insight into the history of the genre is clear evidence in this respect. Literature for children of English expression takes pride in the works of women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, Anna Sewell, E. Nesbit, Eleanor Farjeon, Enid Blyton, Anne Barrett, Cynthia Harnett, Penelope Farmer, Helen Cresswell, Anne Digby, Jacqueline Wilson, J.K. Rowling or Stephenie Meyer.

Although to be praised, English literature for children signed by women writers does not exceed in value or in quantity the one signed by men writers. As a consequence, considering children's literature is the appanage of women is just a matter of prejudice and an example of patriarchal attitude.

The same observations apply to Romanian literature for children in the case of which one might easily identify a balance between men and women writers of books for young readers. On the other hand, we cannot deny the major contribution of Romanian women writers for children who have embraced a variety of literary genres and species: poetry (Nina Cassian, Ana Blandiana, Constanța Buzea, Otilia Cazimir, Elena Farago, Alina Miron or Ioana Nicolaie), fairy tales (Maria Ioniță, Elena Zafira Zănfir, Maria Chita Pop or Maria Itu), legends (Angela Dumitrescu-Begu), novels (Elvira Bogdan, Gica Iuteș or Rodica Moldoveanu), short stories and novellas (Irina Teodorescu, Adina-Maria Popa or Virginia Carianopol).

In spite of being well represented, Romanian literature for children written by women have not shared the same status with the one of men writers in the field who have acquired at least national recognition of their work. This is the case of Mihai Eminescu, Ion Creangă, Ioan Slavici, I.L. Caragiale, Mihail Sadoveanu or Liviu Rebreanu.

What is more, the translation of their work into English or any other foreign language is out of question altogether.

An interesting sub-genre of children's literature is narrative fiction for girls described by Desmet as being intended for a girl audience focusing upon a girl or a group of girls as main protagonists: The gender constructions pertaining to the intended reader create the distinction between books for girls and books for boys, even though this distinction is called into question by some critics and even vehemently opposed. [10]

Besides character representation, gendering also lies in the development of plot, in actions, in point of view and/ or focalisation, in the subject position for the reader, in language use and intertextuality.

Numerous examples could be provided to support the gender theory in relationship with the writing and translation of children's literature. For instance, Grenby [11] draws attention upon an interesting issue: most British public schools used to be single-sex, therefore major differences appeared between the traditions of boys and girls school stories.

The golden age of the girl's story includes L.T. Meade (beginning with *A World of Girls*, 1886), Angela Brazil (from *The Fortunes of Philippa*, 1906), Dorita Fairlie Bruce (from

*Dimsie Goes to School*, 1920), Elinor Brent-Dyer (from *The School at the Chalet*, 1925) and Enid Blyton (from *The Twins at St. Clare's*, 1941 and *First Term at Malory Towers*, 1946). Anne Digby's girls' school stories, from *First Term at Trebizon* in 1978 preserved the tradition, although the sexual theme was introduced in *Boy Trouble at Trebizon* (1980).

On the other hand, Alcott's *Little Women* (1869) has become known as "the milestone text in the history of the family story" [12]. At the beginning of the twentieth century, authors wrote about girls who have lost at least one parent, but their childishness is still preserved: Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903), L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and Eleanor Hodgman's *Pollyanna* (1913).

Examining narrative fiction for girls both diachronically and synchronically, Desmet highlights the variation displayed by this type of literature: "A book for girls from 1900 is different from one published in 2000 insofar that the only common aspect may be the presence of a girl protagonist" [13].

For example, Wilson approaches topics once prohibited in literature for youth. Dixie Diamond, the protagonist of her novel *The Diamond Girls* (2004) is the youngest in a family of four sisters, all from different fathers. Their mother, who is now expecting another child, wants a boy so much that she pretends that she has given birth to a son until one day Dixie changes her new "brother's" nappy and realises he's a girl. Dixie tries to comprehend the actions of her family whilst hiding the secret of their new neighbour, Mary, who is abused by her apparently depressed mother.

In Romanian literature for children, we cannot speak of a tradition of the narrative fiction for girls although there are memorable girl characters paradoxically created by men writers. As an illustration, we can mention Sadoveanu's *Duduia Lizuca* in *Dumbrava minunată* (1926) or Teodoreanu's *Olguta* in *La Medeleni* (1925-1927).

Last but not least, I shall tackle the problem of the women translators of children's literature. According to Robinson [14], women use the discourse of the translator to give themselves a public voice and to ensure themselves a place in the world of writing.

Again, Munday [15] mentions Simon's examples of Canadian feminist translators from Quebec who seek to emphasise their identity and ideological stance in the translation project. One of these, Godard, theorist and translator, is openly assertive about the manipulation this involves: "The feminist translator, affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text" [16].

Interestingly, Lathey [17] tries to situate the translating woman between two major coordinates: the assertive professional and the invisible storyteller. Historical research of translation scholars reveals the activity of women as translators from the end of the seventeenth century (with Aphra Behn's self-designation as "translatress") throughout the eighteenth century (when there was an increase in the range of texts translated by women as daughters of the professional and mercantile classes gained an education and sought professional employment in the world of letters) up to the Victorian age (which witnessed an increasing autonomy for women translators). Statistically speaking, Lathey indicates the following reality: "Today no comprehensive data exist on the relative proportions of women and men as translators of children's literature, although given the predominance of women as children's authors in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that Sutton should note a majority of women's translators of Grimms' tales at that time" [18].

The invitation to check the contribution of women translators as well as women translation theorists in the field of both English and Romanian children's literature is pending and calls for extensive research on the subject. As for the specialists dealing with theoretical and practical aspects of CLT their overwhelming majority is represented by women and no

one can deny the fact that this is not a mere coincidence but an understanding of the necessity to revalue an unforgivable attitude towards children's literature and its translation.

## Notes

- [1] Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*, London and New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 131.
- [2] Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, p.1.
- [3] Shavit Zohar, *Children's Literature*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1992, p. 4.
- [4] Eithne O'Connell, "Translating for Children", in Gunilla M. Anderman, Margaret Rogers (eds.), *Word, Text, Translation: Liber Amicorum for Peter Newmark*, New York, Multilingual Matters, 1999, p.210.
- [5] Peter Hunt, *Literature for Children. Contemporary Criticism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, pp. 2-3.
- [6] Peter Hunt, *Literature for Children. Contemporary Criticism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 2.
- [7] Eithne O'Connell, "Translating for Children", in Gunilla M. Anderman, Margaret Rogers (eds.), *Word, Text, Translation: Liber Amicorum for Peter Newmark*, New York, Multilingual Matters, 1999, p.211.
- [8] Eithne O'Connell, "Translating for Children", in Gunilla M. Anderman, Margaret Rogers (eds.), *Word, Text, Translation: Liber Amicorum for Peter Newmark*, New York, Multilingual Matters, 1999, p.212.
- [9] Lori Chamberlain, "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation", in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* XIII(3), 1988, pp. 455.
- [10] Mieke K.T. Desmet, *Babysitting the Reader. Translating English Narrative Fiction for girls into Dutch (1946-1995)*, Bern, Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishing, 2007, pp.69-70.
- [11] M.O.Grenby, *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p. 145.
- [12] M.O.Grenby, *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p. 146.
- [13] Mieke K.T. Desmet, *Babysitting the Reader. Translating English Narrative Fiction for girls into Dutch (1946-1995)*, Bern, Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishing, 2007, p. 71.
- [14] Douglas Robinson, "Theorising Translation in a Woman's Voice", in *The Translator* 1(2), 1995, pp. 153-175.
- [15] Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*, London and New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 132.
- [16] Barbara Godard, "Theorising Feminist Discourse/Translation", in Susan Bassnett, André Lefevre (eds.) *Translation, History and Culture*, London and New York, Pinter Publishers, 1990, p. 91.
- [17] Gillian Lathey, *The Role of Translators in Children's Literature*, New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 95-97.
- [18] Gillian Lathey, *The Role of Translators in Children's Literature*, New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 96.

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