

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRITISH AND ROMANIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract: This article aims to briefly present the evolution of British and Romanian children's literature. Translating a text for young readers requires a good understanding of what children's literature is. In its turn, defining the genre requires a grasp of its historical evolution. Numerous factors, such as moral values, religious views, pedagogical practices, commerce and finances, have influenced the development of children's literature throughout time, leading to the emergence of a stratified literary polysystem. The interplay of the aforementioned factors, the constant competition between them, has been at the heart of the transformation and progression of the genre. While resources treating British children's literature are numerous, those dealing with the genre in Romania and with its trajectory throughout time are scarce. This lack of materials could be justified on the one hand by the late emergence of Romania as a geographical and political entity, and on the other hand by the lack of interest in children's literature on the part of academics.

Keywords: children's literature, history, Britain, Romania

Introduction

Talking about children's literature as a well-defined genre proves to be a rather difficult task due to a variety of factors, such as the supposed purpose of such literature, the needs and expectations of the target audience, the fluid boundaries between general or adult literature and that for children, religious beliefs and pedagogical views on what was appropriate for a young reader and their variation throughout time, etc. Translating a text for young readers requires an understanding of what children's literature is, and in order to define the genre it is essential to become familiar with the evolution of children's literature throughout time.

British children's literature

From a historical point of view, stories, tales, and songs specifically created for children did not exist prior to the seventeenth century. Children and adults shared their reading material (e.g., *Gesta Romanorum*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*); the few books intended for children were written in vernacular, and they were accessible only to those who were part of "good" society or those who served the church (Shavit 1986: 160). Books specifically for children began to be produced in the eighteenth century and the whole industry truly flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century (Shavit 1986: 3). This lack of reading material for children during previous centuries was due to several factors, but the main one was the fact that the idea of childhood as a distinct stage in the development of an individual did not exist. In John Rowe Townsend's words, "Before there could be children's books, there had to be children – children, that is, who were accepted as beings with their own particular needs and interests, not only as miniature men and women" (cited in Shavit 1986: 4). Particularly during the middle ages, a person's expected life span was considerably shorter than it presently is. Children began working early and in harsh conditions; they could not

afford “the extravagance of childhood” (Shavit 1986: 5). As soon as they passed the toddler stage, they shared the responsibilities of the adults in their family.

Before the eighteenth century, no difference was made in readership ages in the popular literature circulating at the time. Literacy levels were low; by the mid-seventeenth century, only approximately 30 per cent of men could read well, and the percentage of women was considerably lower (Kinnell 2005: 137). Despite low literacy rates, by the end of the seventeenth century, more and more children were attending school under the patronage of the religious establishment (Shavit 1986: 137). However, they were removed from school at around the age of 7 or 8, when they were deemed old enough to earn for their families (Kinnell 2005: 137).

The materials used by children were horn books and ABC books which later on turned into primers. The existence of horn books has been dated back to the fifteenth century, and in children’s portraits, they are depicted hanging by a ribbon from their waists (Kinnell 2005: 137). Horn books were usually made from a bat-shaped piece of wood onto which was pasted the alphabet, the Lord’s Prayer, and covered with a transparent piece of horn – hence their name. Other versions were also available, made out of lead, alloy, bone, or even silver. As for ABC books, which eventually developed into primers, they contained the alphabet, the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments and other such elements of catechism. The opening maxim of primers was “In Adam’s fall we sinned all” (Shavit 1986: 137).

Prior to the eighteenth century, books in the real sense of the term were used by well-to-do children, who afforded private tutoring. These were schoolbooks – Latin and Greek grammars, spelling books, arithmetic books – and courtesy books – such as the English translation of Erasmus’s *A Lytelle Booke of Good Manners for Chyldren* (1532) or Francis Seager’s *The School of Vertue and Booke of Good Nourture for Chyldren to Learn Theyr Dutie By* (1557). However, these books were part of the old apprenticeship educational system, not children’s literature in the modern sense (Shavit 1986: 135). The number of boys who were schooled during this period was larger than that of girls, so their reading and writing skills were overall better (Kinnell 2005: 137).

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the adult-child polarization emerged, resulting in a new concept of childhood (Shavit 1986: 6). The public, namely those who had received an education and who were in turn responsible for the education of the young, admitted for the first time that childhood represented a special stage in one’s life and that children had special needs, distinct from those of adults (Nikolajeva 1995: ix). The idea of what children needed and what values they had to assimilate changed from century to century, and so did the reading material made available to them by adults. One example to illustrate this is the prohibition of fairy tales from canonised children’s literature at the turn of the nineteenth century, more realistic texts being favoured instead (Shavit 1986: 27). In the seventeenth century, children were perceived and portrayed as angelic and sweet; their families treated them almost like pets (Shavit 1986: 6). This view of childhood led to a different one, initiated by moralists and pedagogues within the church, who considered that children should be shielded from corrupting influences and that they should be educated and disciplined by adults (Shavit 1986: 7). Within this view of childhood, books became, in Shavit’s words, only a “pedagogical vehicle” (1986: 7). The idea that books should both contribute to the spiritual welfare of children and instruct them has not changed since the middle of the eighteenth century, and it acts as a dominant force in the production of children’s books even nowadays (Shavit 1986: 26).

Under the influence of the religious establishment, Puritan writings for children appeared during the late seventeenth century (Shavit 1986: 135). This official reading material was tightly controlled and sought to instil in children the desire to attain salvation after death.

One of the most prolific of the Puritan authors was Benjamin Keach, and one of his most famous writings was *War with the Devil* (1673), which depicts the fight for a young man's soul between Conscience, Truth, the Devil, and Christ (Kinnell 2005: 139). In Thomas White's *A Little Book for Little Children* (c.1660), young readers are encouraged to read the Bible and to avoid "ballads and foolish books" (Kinnell 2005: 138). Other important Puritan texts for children were Arthur Dent's *The Plaine Mans Pathway to Heaven; wherein every man may clearely see whether he shall be saved or damned* (1610), and John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (1563), usually known as the *Book of Martyrs* (Kinnell 2005: 138). The gloomy tone and attitude toward children can be noticed in both the subject matter and the language used to treat it; a good illustration of this idea is James Janeway's *A Token for Children: Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children*. Young children who died either because of an unspecified illness or because of the Plague lecture their family members and the companions whom they left behind for their laxity in religious matters (Kinnell 2005: 138). In *Children's literature* (2008), Matthew Grenby argues that James Janeway's book was an important foundation for modern children's literature despite providing "morbid, not to say traumatic, accounts" of children's deaths (4). Grenby offers two arguments to support this idea: Janeway's "insistence that a work of imaginative literature can be as important to a child's future as any exclusively didactic or devotional text" (2008: 4) and his "conviction that [his] writing would be most effective if children enjoyed reading it" (2008: 5). Toward the end of the seventeenth century, writers were beginning to create more sympathetic works for children, one such example being Thomas Lye's *The Child's Delight* (1671), a spelling book (Kinnell 2005: 138).

The writings of J.J. Rousseau and those of John Locke, both usually credited as the "discoverers" of childhood (Lesnik-Oberstein 2005: 24), influenced the creation of new models for children's books. A key concept here is that of *tabula rasa*: the child is pure and innocent, fresh clay to be moulded for the better (Shavit 1986: 139). John Locke, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), draws attention to the importance of presenting children with attractive formats as children's books are meant to both amuse and instruct, an idea which reflects the changing mood of the times (Kinnell 2005: 138). While J.J. Rousseau encouraged only the reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, John Locke recommended Aesop's *Fables*, *Reynard the Fox*, and the Scriptures (Shavit 1986: 139). By means of his recommendations, Locke legitimated the introduction of the model of the fable in children's books, while also generating a high demand for Aesop's *Fables*, with numerous editions being issued at the time (Shavit 1986: 140). Apart from the fable, other new models were created: the moral story, the "instructive" story, and the animal story. The moral story used a number of stock characters and actions, while an all-knowing adult, as suggested by Rousseau's educational model, would transform every experience of the child into an educational one (Shavit 1986: 141). The "instructive" story was a sort of textbook of nature studies disguised into fiction, so as to render learning more entertaining (Shavit 1986: 142). Examples of books based on the instructive model are Samuel Goodrich's Peter Parley series (beginning in 1827), which tells about art, travel, nature, and history (*Tales of Peter Parley About America*, *Tales of Peter Parley About Europe*), and Jacob Abbott's Rollo series, which describes a young boy's attempts to cope with the challenges of daily life (*Rollo Learning to Talk*, *Rollo Learning to Read*) (Shavit 1986: 142). The animal story relied on the consistent use of the imaginary; the didactic animal story, which brought together religious views and the new educational views of the time, was very popular at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Their popularity started to decline toward the middle of the nineteenth century, when fairy tales regained popularity (Shavit 1986: 144).

Prior to the existence of official reading material for children, young readers found an unofficial source of entertainment in chapbooks. The most popular reading material of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, chapbooks were paper-covered books between sixteen and twenty-four pages long, with woodcut illustrations, and they were sold by peddlers and hawkers at a low price (Shavit 1986: 162). While their low price made them accessible and appealing to the poor, children of wealthy families were equally delighted by their contents in the absence of other reading material (Shavit 1986: 164). Chapbooks borrowed heavily from and were largely inspired by the following sources: ballad sheets (*Children in the Wood, The Death and Burial of Cock Robin*), sometimes rewritten in prose; Elizabethan jest books (*Cambridge Jest, or Wit's Recreation; Poets Jest, or Mirth in Abundance*); romance and chivalry stories (*Guy, Earl of Warwick; Bevis of Southampton; Hector, Prince of Troy; Valentine and Orson; Robin Hood*); adventure stories (*Johnny Armstrong of Westmoreland, Captain James Hind*); sensational and supernatural stories (*The History of Dr. John Faustus*), a small number of adaptations and abridgment of books that were popular at the time (*Robinson Crusoe, Moll Flanders*), fairy tales (*Little Red Riding Hood, Puss in Boots, Blue Beard*) (Shavit 1986: 161).

With the appearance of the school system, more and more importance was invested in children's education, and the more it gained in importance, the less the educational and the religious establishments approved of chapbooks (Shavit 1986: 164). In fact, the latter openly attacked chapbooks, deeming them as *the* source of evil, as stressed by Zohar Shavit herself (1986: 164). Around the middle of the eighteenth century, the Sunday School Movement had already become an institution, reading among the poor representing a new phenomenon encouraged by religious philanthropists (Shavit 1986: 169).

In view of providing more proper reading material to the poor, the religious establishment began producing religious tracts. Hanna More was the first to attempt to meet the reading needs of the poor by providing alternatives to chapbooks (Shavit 1986: 170). In 1795, the first Cheap Repository Tract was ready; these tracts used several traits of chapbooks in order to compete with them: the familiar format, woodcut illustrations, the serialization of books, and the use of attractive titles similar to those of popular chapbooks, such as *The Cottage Cook; or, Mrs. Jones' Cheap Dishes; Tawny Rachel; or, The Fortune Teller; Robert and Richard; or, The Ghost of Poor Molly, Who Was Drowned in Richard's Mill Pond* (Shavit 1986:170). Tracts also incorporated the fairy tale model into their instructive tales, replacing fairies with a religious figure, and beasts and giants with dishonesty, gambling, and alcoholism (Shavit 1986: 171). The low price of religious tracts, maintained thanks to the generous contributions of religious-oriented societies, ensured their success: in the first six weeks of their publication, three hundred thousand tracts were sold, and by March 1796 the number soared to two million (Shavit 1986: 172). During the same period of time, a number of books managed to rise above the mediocrity of Puritan religious tracts. One such example is that of William Ronksley and his book entitled *The Child's Weeks-Work: or, A Little Book so nicely suited to the Genius and Capacity of a Little Child...that it will infallibly Allure and Lead him on into a way of Reading* (1712), which comprises charming rhymes although its intention remains moral. Another example is Isaac Watts, writing at the turn of the century, when Puritanism approached the education of the young in a more relaxed way. Watts wrote verse; his *Divine Songs attempted in Easie Language for the Use of Children* (1715) were popular even in the Victorian era, his "How doth the little busy bee" being lovely parodied by Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) (Kinnell 2005: 139).

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, books for children were becoming more child-oriented, both in tone and in subject matter. Nathaniel Crouch's *Winter Evening Entertainments* is an early example of this transition to more child-centred material (Kinnell

2005: 140). It is also during the eighteenth century that the number of children increased, causing a chain reaction: a greater number of children in need of education led to more academies and small private schools being opened across the country, which in its turn stimulated the market for schoolbooks and lighter reading material for children (Kinnell 2005: 140). It did not take long until publishers realised the commercial potential of selling books to those responsible for the education of children, namely to parents and schools. The educational system had a significant impact on publishers not only commercially, but also in terms of what was being published; the prevailing educational views of the time had to be taken into consideration by publishers even if it meant losing potential financial gains (e.g., they did not publish fairy tales) (Shavit 1986: 144). Initially, when the people involved in book trading realised that publishing children's books could prove to be profitable from a commercial point of view, they attempted to appeal primarily to those who could afford buying books, the bourgeoisie and the upper classes (Shavit 1986: 164), while the poor continued to read chapbooks and religious tracts.

The first commercially successful publisher of children's books was John Newbery. He managed to combine commercial and educational interests by appealing to both children and adults: he included amusement in his books and justified it through the presence of instruction and morals (Shavit 1986: 166). While adults viewed his books in a positive light thanks to their moral aspect, Newbery employed chapbook-specific literary devices so that children would find his books enjoyable. The following two examples illustrate Newbery's reliance on chapbook elements: in his first book, he used a characteristic chapbook character, Jack the Giant Killer, as a moral preacher; and in *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes* (1765), the main character, Margery, is involved in strange adventures, one of which involves her being accused of witchcraft, another typical element of chapbooks (Shavit 1986: 166-167). However, the factor with the greatest impact on Newbery's success was his use of illustrations, an element which from that time onward became an integral part of children's books (Shavit 1986: 167). John Newbery's decisions in publishing his books ensured his success. His first book, *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, and those which followed it were published in several editions between 1744 and the middle of the nineteenth century, even though Newbery targeted the middle and upper-class children audience (Shavit 1986: 168). As Shavit remarks, "this successful trend carried over to other publishers as well. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the book market was almost overflowed by publishing for children, as the memories of a German schoolmaster L. F. Gedike, indicate." (1986: 168). Newbery's trademark was binding his books in Dutch floral boards, the overall better quality separating his published works from the less polished reading materials of the previous century (Kinnell 2005: 141).

John Newbery's activity also comprised published materials other than books. One example is his *Lilliputian Magazine* (1751–1752), which was significant in terms of content, yet less successful (Kinnell 2005: 141). The magazine combined light-hearted material, such as jests, songs, and riddles, with moral tales. Another example is schoolbooks. In trying to cater to the needs of the growing school system, John Newbery also published schoolbooks, but they were more expensive than his other books; *Account of the Constitution and Present State of Great Britain* (1759) cost 2 shillings (Kinnell 2005: 142). When Newbery's nephew died in 1780, his wife, Elizabeth Newbery, continued the family publishing business, specialising mainly in the education market (Kinnell 2005: 145). However, she also continued publishing several earlier Newbery items, and collaborated with other publishers, thus extending her available products catalogue: in her 1800's Catalogue, thirteen one-penny and fourteen twopenny chapbooks were offered in addition to the 400 or so more substantial items, like schoolbooks and moral tales (Kinnell 2005: 145). Other publishers of children's

literature in London in the eighteenth century were Vernor and Hood, Joseph Johnson, John Nourse, and John Marshall. One major positive change in the eighteenth century was the improvement of illustration techniques; John and Thomas Bewick refined wood engraving, and copper engravings were used in more expensive children's books (Kinnell 2005: 146).

Confronted with the criticism of both the educational and religious establishments on the one hand, and challenged by the growing children's books market on the other hand, chapbook publishers increased their efforts and adapted by publishing chapbooks specifically for children (Shavit 1986: 175). *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) were popular choices of stories to be adapted into chapbook versions for children (Kinnell 2005: 140). While regular chapbook versions of *Robinson Crusoe* portrayed the main character as an armed man, ready to fight against the dangers of the island on which he had been marooned, versions for children focused predominantly on the domestic aspects of Robinson Crusoe's story: "Their illustrations tend to show Crusoe sitting at his table, with his pots neatly arranged around him, his garden cleared and separated from the jungle, and his guns hung up unused on the wall of his hut." (Grenby 2008: 178). To render their products more attractive and increase their marketability, chapbook publishers included coloured illustrations in their chapbooks, and provided an outlet for other reading materials frowned upon by society – yet thoroughly enjoyed by children –, such as fairy tales and romances (Shavit 1986: 175) Newcastle was one of the earliest chapbook centres to specialise in children's works (Kinnell 2005: 146). James Catnach, who published a large number of chapbooks for children between 1813 and 1838 (e.g., *Cock Robin*, *Mother Goose*, *Simple Simon* and *Tom Hickathrift*), was the last one to publish chapbooks in the first half of the nineteenth century (Shavit 1986: 175).

The constant competition between chapbook publishers, commercial publishers, and the educational and the religious establishments eventually led to the stratification of the literary polysystem (Shavit 1986: 159). In Zohar Shavit's words, "the canonized system lost its homogeneous nature and became heterogeneous (moral stories, animal stories, instructive stories, primers, readers). Eventually, it became stratified and subject to competition and struggle between the various models." (1986: 145). This observation brings us to the twentieth century, when the children's books market presented itself similarly to the manner in which we know it today: competitive and stratified.

Romanian children's literature

Unfortunately, a similarly detailed historical evolution cannot be outlined for children's literature in Romania. Firstly, studies specifically undertaking this task do not exist. This could be due to at least two factors: 1) Romania did not exist as a unified political and geographical entity until the twentieth century and, therefore, it is difficult to speak of a Romanian children's literature, to select works intended for a young audience which could be labelled as Romanian and to order them chronologically; and 2) children's literature does not receive a degree of recognition high enough to justify – in the eyes of academics or other specialists – the writing of well-researched studies about its evolution. Secondly, the books which do treat the subject of Romanian children's literature are usually anthologies of texts, oftentimes accompanied by short essays intended for students, which do not provide substantial insight into the evolution of this literary genre throughout the centuries.

Texts borrowed from foreign literatures excluded, children's literature of Romanian origin could be said to have begun in oral form, under the influence of folklore. In *O istorie a literaturii pentru copii și adolescenți* (*A History of Literature for Children and Adolescents*) (2006) – one of the few books I could find on the topic –, Iuliu Rațiu includes in this category lullabies, legends (*Meșterul Manole*, *Soarele și luna*), ballads of various types – pastoral,

fantastic, historical, etc. – (*Miorița, Iovan Iorgovan, Constantin Brâncoveanu*), fairy tales (in Romanian, *basm*), anecdotes (in Romanian, *snoavă*; the most popular ones had Păcală as a protagonist), riddles, and proverbs (244). Rațiu continues by mentioning translated works, such as *One Thousand and One Nights* (or *The Arabian Nights*), which appeared for the first time in Romanian in 1835, bearing the Neo-Greek title *Halima* and the subtitle “Mythical Arabian tales” – in Romanian, “Povești mitologicești arăbești” (Rațiu 2006: 109).

A distinction is made by Iuliu Rațiu between universal and national literature (2006: 40). In the former category, he includes works such as *The Iliad, The Odyssey, The Mahabharata, Gargantua and Pantagruel, The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Poem of the Cid, Don Quixote, The Song of Roland, Gulliver’s Travels, Robinson Crusoe, Romeo and Juliet, Richard III* – several of which could hardly be considered children’s literature, yet which are important for a young reader in Rațiu’s view. In the category of national literature, Rațiu draws attention to several Romanian works from the seventeenth century onward, which were part of what he calls an “essential library” for children and teenagers, “not fully formed yet [at the time]” (2006: 245) He includes here: *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Theodosie*; Ion Neculce’s 42 legends gathered under the title *O samă de cuvinte* (1732-1744); Dimitrie Cantemir’s *Istoria ieroglifică* (1883); Ion Budai-Deleanu’s epic *Țiganiada* (1800-1812); the fables of Dimitrie Țichindeal, Alexandru Donici, and Grigore Alexandrescu; Anton Pann’s *Năzdrăvăniile lui Nastratin Hogeia* (1853); Dimitrie Bolintineanu’s historical ballads (*Bătăliile românilor* (1859), *Legende noi* (1862)); Alexandru Odobescu’s historical short stories (*Mihnea Vodă cel Rău* (1860), *Doamna Chiajna* (1860)); Petre Ispirescu’s collected fairy tales, *Legende sau basmele românilor* (1882); Ion Creangă’s *Amintiri din copilărie* (1892); Mihai Eminescu’s *Făt-Frumos-din-Lacrimă* (1870) and *Călin (file de poveste)* (1876); Ioan Slavici’s *Zâna zorilor* (1872); Alexandru Vlahuță’s stories evoking the life of poor children (*Mogâldea, În ajunul Crăciunului, De-a baba oarba*); Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea’s *Domnul Vucea* (1892-1893); Emil Gârleanu’s *Din lumea celor care nu cuvântă* (1910); Mihail Sadoveanu’s *Creanga de aur* (1933), *Neamul Șoimăreștilor* (1915), and *Domnul Trandafir* (1907); the poems of George Coșbuc, Ștefan Octavian Iosif, Elena Farago, Tudor Arghezi, George Topîrceanu, Vasile Alecsandri, Otilia Cazimir; Cezar Petrescu’s *Fram, ursul polar* (1931); Ionel Teodoreanu’s *Ulița copilăriei* (1923) and *La Medeleni* (1968); Radu Tudoran’s *Toate pânzele sus* (1954), Constantin Chiriță’s *Cireșarii* (1956), and Marin Sorescu’s *Ocolul infinitului mic pornind de la nimic* (1973).

Although Rațiu’s book does not provide a historical outline per se, it still represents one step forward in terms of how much attention is granted to children’s literature and its evolution. Several works deemed essential by Rațiu for children and adolescents were not intended for children at the time of their creation, and are not for children nowadays either. While one can imagine a teenager interested in Asian cultures reading *The Mahabharata*, this would be an exception, and not a common preference among young readers. Certainly, it can be argued that neither *Robinson Crusoe* nor *Gulliver’s Travels* were children’s books upon their first publication, yet the versions which have become children’s reading material are adaptations of the original texts; Rațiu does not seem to suggest that children should read adapted versions of *The Mahabharata* or of *Don Quixote*.

Conclusion

The late emergence of Romania as a unified geographical and political entity, along with the impact of Communism on culture, in general, and on the production of books, in particular, render all the more difficult the task of reconstructing the evolutionary trajectory of children’s literature in Romania. While British children’s literature had centuries to assimilate elements from other cultures, then to produce something original, and to continue evolving

under various influences, Romanian children's literature presents itself in a rather fragmented form.

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