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CULTURAL NOTIONS AND LITERARY BOUNDARIES: ON THE CREATION OF THE SYSTEMIC OPPOSITION BETWEEN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND ADULT LITERATURE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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In 1709 Sir Richard Steele described on the pages of *Tatler*, the reading material of his godson in the following manner:

> I perceived him a very great historian in Aesop's Fables; but he frankly declared to me his mind that he did not delight in that learning, because he did not believe that they were true, for which reason I found that he had very much turned his studies for about a twelve-months past, into the lives and adventures of Don Bellianis of Greece, Guy of Warwick, The Seven Champions and other historians of that age .... He could tell you the mismanagements of John Hickathroft, find fault with the passionate temper in Bevis of Southampton, and loved Saint George for being champion of England. (Quoted by Darton 1958: 33)

Sir Richard Steele was not the only one to describe children's reading material in this manner. Similar evidence can be found almost by all European writers of the eighteenth century when they describe their childhood. Be it Boswell, or Goethe, for instance in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, all wished to remember with much nostalgia, the chapbooks they used to read in their childhood.

All this testifies to the fact that during the eighteenth century chapbooks became the most important reading material for children. However, neither the religious nor the educational establishments were as delighted as Boswell or Goethe. On the contrary, the more important child's education (and consequently his reading matter) became, the less the educational establishment was ready to accept what children read, namely chapbooks.

«The reading of romance is a most frivolous occupation, and time merely thrown away,» wrote Philip Dormer to his son in 1740 (quoted by Darton 1958: 47) and thus joined the war declared on chapbooks. The establishment's fight against chapbooks was not however limited to propagandistic articles. At the

same time a heavily invested effort to overcome chapbooks was made, aiming at offering children alternative reading material. These texts, written as an answer to chapbooks were the beginning of official books for children.

I will deal here shortly with the processes in which chapbooks served as a decisive factor in stimulating the creation of a new system. In other words, I will describe the process in which a new system was introduced into culture. The emergence of this new system has totally changed the literary map and resulted in a considerable change in all cultural parameters; a change in the existing literary boundaries of the time, and consequently a change in boundaries between readers, writers, languages and texts.

These new boundaries implied the constitution of a new systemic opposition in the literary system. An indispensable pre-condition for this literary opposition was the previous cultural change in the notion of child and childhood, as described by Philippe Ariès, Norbert Elias and others. It is not necessary for our discussion to repeat here the well-known thesis of Ariès. It is sufficient to mention that the new notion of the child implied also a creation of a new addressee, who hitherto was not recognized as different from adults and hence was not considered as someone of special and different needs.

As a result of this new understanding of child and childhood new boundaries were introduced into all spheres of culture, including the literary system.

In describing this process of change in the literary boundaries, I will touch upon the three following issues:

1. How the new system emerged out of the non-canonized system;
2. What was the character of the newly drawn boundaries;
3. How did the new boundaries generate the process of stratification of the children's system into canonized and non-canonized systems.

1

The emergence of a need for books for children evolved a process in which a new function was created: the function of reading material for children. However, the elements which could carry it were still lacking, and needed either to be created or to be found among existing elements.

Once a new understanding of child and childhood emerged into societal consciousness a new and previously unknown demand for books, which should be produced exclusively for children appeared on the cultural scene. Until then children, who were educated in the framework of the apprenticeship system, were not in a need for books in their educational process. As a new concept of education – the school system – replaced the apprenticeship system, books became for the first time part of the educational system and an indispensable vehicle for achieving its goals. The goals were clear: to teach children

how to read, in order to enable them to read the scriptures by themselves. Once however, the children learned how to read, it became impossible to control their reading material altogether, and to decide what they should read, and more important, what they should not read. As far as official books for children were concerned, none of them had a very strong appeal: they were far too moralistic to be interesting. They were far too dull.

This is why unofficially the function of reading material for children was to a large extent, carried out at first by an unexpected source: the non-canonized literature of the time, that is to say, chapbooks. This source remained for quite a long time unnoticed, since the notion of children's reading did not exist in societal consciousness. Quite soon however, the establishments involved in the education of the child had realized what children actually read, and once commercial publishing discovered the huge potential of this market, they began to compete and challenge the real reading material of children. Out of this competition a heterogeneous and stratified system of books for children emerged into European cultural life.

Prior to the seventeenth century there were few books specifically produced for children. The few children who knew how to read, read adult literature. Most children's exposure to reading was provided in shared reading sessions with adults.

Almost three hundred years after the invention of the printing press, children's books, mainly ABC's and courtesy books were few in number and were produced neither systematically nor steadily. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, as education spread and literate circles expanded, a new reading public emerged, creating a large demand for children's books.

The non-canonized adult system, however, was the first to enter into the vacuum, conjured by the new-born function of children's readers and the first to supply the new demand which was then created by this legitimization. The new educational system created both the legitimization of books for children as well as a corpus of texts and a set of norms according to which official books for children had to be written.

Out of the need to resist its invasion into the vacuum, the establishments endeavored to introduce new boundaries into the literary system which suggested for the first time that the reading material of children must be different and distinct from that of adults.

2

For rather a long time the new boundaries between adult and children's literature were blurred and unclear. It took more than one hundred years for cultural consciousness to be aware of the existence of the new borders and more than one hundred and fifty years to make them into a distinct and une-

quivocal opposition. That is to say to make the systemic affiliation definitive. Only towards the middle of the nineteenth century did the systems become exclusive: a text either entered one or the other system. Until then, the pattern of *sharing elements* continued to exist side by side the new pattern of systems which excluded each other.

When children's literature began to emerge, the new boundaries were at first partial and ad-hoc boundaries. The new function of children's reading was fulfilled by systemically undefined elements such as shared reading material, and traditional reading material which was regarded as part of the entire literature. In order for the new boundaries to get stabilized there evolved a need to find elements for the new functions, which could distinguish between the two systems.

These elements were found by way of transplantation of new functions on existing (sometimes even reluctant) elements, by translation of old functions into new ones, by creation of new elements, and by adoption of existing elements. The first three procedures characterized the operations of the official system, while the last one was typical of the non-official system.

In the official system various establishments were involved in the production of books for children. The new educational system was initially monopolized, as well as institutionalized, by the religious establishment, which was in the best position to supply the necessary facilities demanded by the newly recognized need for schools.

Very soon however, children's reading interests developed beyond the Puritan literature. Their interests were partially filled by new models of writing for children which were based on different educational views. These new models emerged from two primary sources: the commercial and the moralist school of education.

The most significant change initiated by the moralist school lay in the new raison d'être of children's books. Unlike the Puritans who taught children to read as means for better comprehension of the Scriptures, the new school of education considered books as the most appropriate means for integrating Locke's call for amusement and instruction. Hence, the shaping of the new boundaries, as well as the transformation of the system from homogeneous into a heterogeneous, was a result of new cultural notions of education, which demanded the formation of new spheres in culture.

As new educational doctrines evolved, and children's books gained widespread appeal, commercial publishing became more and more aware of the existence of the field of books for children. The efforts of the educational establishments on the one hand and the fact that children were reading chapbooks proved to eighteenth-century commercial publishers that there was a section of the reading public whose needs were hardly being administered to. Once the book trade came to realize the commercial potential of the children's

market, it began to produce books for children which could serve as an alternative to the popular chapbooks, but all the same did not violate the values of official books for children.

As a result, at the end of the eighteenth century, through constant competition with chapbooks, commercial publishing for children had become an established branch of the publishing field. The introduction of both the commercial element as well as new educational views led to a change in the canonized system; since it lost its homogeneous nature and became heterogeneous, comprising then moral stories, animal stories, instructive stories, primers, readers etc. Gradually, children's literature became stratified and subject to competition between competing elements and competing systems: the canonized and the non-canonized system of books for children.

3

Although the various establishments involved in the production of books for children had different motivations and produced children's books in order to achieve different goals, they did share one common denominator: all tried to compete with chapbooks. They did so not only by declaring a war on chapbooks and trying to prohibit their reading, but also by offering children alternative reading material. The books which were written by various establishments, used more often than not elements commonly found in chapbooks themselves. This was especially true for their use of plots and stock characters.

Attempts to challenge chapbooks were made by all publishers of books for children. Most interesting however is the case of religious publishing for children, which despite its abomination for chapbooks could not ignore them, and actually used them for its writing of books for children.

In the production of the religious tracts a systematic effort was made to challenge all possible components of chapbooks and offer them an alternative. The tracts used the familiar format of chapbooks, as well as woodcuts. In order to compete with chapbooks the device of serialization was used as well. Some tracts even deliberately tried to replace chapbooks by offering attractive titles that resembled well-known 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.*

Another tactic used by tract writers to compete with chapbooks was the adoption of familiar chapbooks genres to didactic teaching. Poem-like texts were to replace frivolous romances and adventures. Even the sensational and manual books were not exempt. Mother Bunch of the chapbooks, who gave recipes for finding the right husband, was replaced by Mrs. James, who taught the art of industry and good management. Criminal stories were also used for moral purposes. Of course crimes were never romanticized in religious tracts

(as they were for instance in *Robin Hood*), but they were used by the story to teach the right lesson: criminals were always punished.

Even more unexpected was the use of fairy-tales by the tracts. Fairy tales posed a more difficult problem than poems or even criminal stories, because they were considered the most dangerous reading material for children. Thus, religious tracts could not openly use them; on the other hand, religious educators wanted to take advantage of their popularity and appeal. Thus, fairy tales themselves were never included in tracts, but their literary model was transferred into an instructive tale. That is, the fairy-tale was transformed into a religious power, while giants and wild beasts were for instance replaced by dishonesty, gambling and alcoholism. In such a way chapbooks not only set in motion the production of books for children, but also determined to a large extent the character of the texts themselves.

My discussion of the emergence of the system of children's literature in the eighteenth century describes the scheme of a historical process by which new boundaries between adult and children's readership were drawn. The process of determining the new boundaries was a long one. More important however was its persisting character. Even after the new boundaries had been culturally recognized, and even after they became distinct (the discrepancy between those two stages was rather long) they never remained the same. The relations between the boundaries have always been dynamic; the systemic opposition between children's literature and adult literature continued to be one of the most prominent oppositions in the literary polysystem, but its concrete manifestations changed from one period to another, thus reshuffling the boundaries, and changing the elements which carry these functions.

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