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Aspects and Issues in the History of Children's Literature

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The Historical Model of the Development of Children's Literature

Zohar Shavit

Introduction

Is it possible to claim a universal structure for the development of children's literature? (On the question of literary universals and laws, see Even-Zohar, 1978, 45-53; 1990, 53-72.)

Assuming that we understand history as being composed of an endless string of details that may become meaningful only after they are organized under a general structure, this essay argues for the existence of such a universal structure--provided, of course, that we are interested in general patterns and not in minor deviations from them.

Since the issue at stake is historical poetics, it is important to stress that the competence to make generalizations about culture, and to describe its dominant structures is at the heart of the matter. It is one of the most important obligations of historical poetics. That is to say, it is the duty of historiography to explore the structural development of culture, where by "structural" I refer to the material that can be organized as the dominant phenomena in our description of history, and not to the analysis and explanation of all details involved.

Model of Development

On the basis of the rich and highly informative literature on the history of children's literature (see e.g. Avery, 1975; Avery and Bull, 1965; Brockman, 1982; Brüggemann and Ewers, 1982; Grenz, 1981; Ewers, 1980; Ewers, 1989; Macleod, 1975; Muir, 1969; Pickering, 1981; Rose, 1984; Thwaite, 1972; Townsend, 1977; Zipes, 1988) and on the basis of such an understanding of history and historiography, I would like to argue that *a similar historical model is common to all children's literatures both in their inception and later on in their development*. The same stages of development

and the same historical patterns recur time and again in all children's literatures, transcending national boundaries and even temporal ones. Regardless of when and where a system of children's literature began to develop, whether its emergence took place a hundred or even two hundred years later, *all systems of children's literature known to us, without exception, pass through the same stages of development. Moreover, the same cultural factors and institutions are involved in their creation.*

The cases of the Puritans first in England and, later, in America, or the Jewish Enlightenment in Germany 150 years later, or the Egyptian Enlightenment at the turn of the twentieth century, all lead to the conclusion that it was always ideology, linked with a strong educational doctrine, which formed the basis of official children's literature. The tenet that children needed books in the course of their education constituted the emergence of a new function in the literary system, that is to say, the emergence of a specific system of books designated for children only.

Once this function was created, the same model of historical development followed: *through a battle between what children were supposed to read and what children actually wanted to read, there gradually emerged a heterogeneous and stratified system of books for children.*

The Link with the Educational System

Arguing for a general model underlying the development of children's literature, I will present its dominant components, focusing on the following two issues:

1. The link between the comprehension of the notions of child and of childhood, particularly within the framework of various educational ideologies, and the writing of texts specifically addressing children.
2. The manner in which two different and, to some extent, contradictory sources in culture were used in order to establish a system of books for children: the new educational system, responsible for the creation of books that suited children according to its understanding of their needs, producing more often than not books children were reluctant to read, and the nonofficial adult system, in most cases chapbooks, which supplied reading material children were eager to read.

Before children's literature could begin to develop, a total reform in the notion of childhood was required, a reform that was described in the pioneering and well-known work of Philippe Ariès and his followers (Ariès, 1962; Arnold, 1980; Badinter, 1980; DeMause, 1975). Before this, before children's needs gained recognition and legitimation as distinct and different from those of adults, children's literature could not have emerged. To repeat John Townsend's formulation: "Before there could be children's books, there had to be children" (Townsend, 1977, 17).

It is not necessary to repeat here Ariès's well-known thesis. For our purposes, it is sufficient to mention that the new notion of the child implied, *inter alia*, the creation of a new addressee, who was hitherto not recognized as

"*sui generis*," as different from adult addressees, and consequently was not viewed as a subject with distinctive and particular needs.

Once a new understanding of the child and of childhood emerged into societal consciousness (in a long and enigmatic process), a new and previously unknown demand for books exclusively produced for children appeared on the cultural scene. Until then children, who were educated in the framework of the apprenticeship system, did not need books in their educational process. As a new concept of education--the school system--replaced the apprenticeship system, books became part of the educational system for the first time and an indispensable vehicle for achieving its goals. Thus, the new educational system both legitimized books for children and created a certain corpus of texts and a set of norms according to which official books for children had to be written.

Prior to the seventeenth century, few books were produced specifically for children (on the question of texts addressing children in early times, see Shaner, 1992). Children who knew how to read would have shared adult literature. Most children's exposure to reading was provided in shared reading sessions with adults. Thus, almost three hundred years after the invention of the printing press, children's books, mainly ABCs and "courtesy" books, were few in number and were produced neither systematically nor steadily. The few children's books published prior to the seventeenth century acquired only a limited audience, comprising children who would either hold a suitable place in "good" society or would serve the Church. Children's literature was not yet recognized as a distinct field of culture. Most of the texts that did address children comprised "books of manners" and courtesy books that can be described as part of a larger "culture of etiquette" prevalent at the time and were not at all part of children's literature in its modern sense.

The purpose of those texts was to teach children (obviously of certain social rank) the behavior appropriate to their status in society. The educational system *did not require or leave room for further reading, nor did it encourage further education by means of books*. Moreover, existing books lacked the recognition that became part of the conceptual cultural framework of the eighteenth century--the recognition that children needed books of their own that should differ from adult books and that would suit their needs, at least as understood at the time.

Only toward the end of the seventeenth century, with the emergence of Puritan writing for children, did books for children become a culturally recognized field, as special books were issued in order to fulfill children's educational needs. It must be remembered, however, that the emergence of a new type of books did not imply the total disappearance of texts existing until then. It was typical of this development that "books of manners" and courtesy books continued to exist in the system for a very long period of time. Their demise was not immediate. Their disappearance from the literary scene involved either slow decline or integration into the newly emerging texts for children, implying that they began to carry new and up-to-date functions. Most important of all was their new position in the cultural system: from now on it was the new system of education that determined the nature of texts for children, old and new alike.

Unlike the case of adult literature, the educational system was intrinsically involved in the development of books for children, which later emerged in culture as a system of children's literature. The pattern of development in children's literature indicates that the educational system not only served as a framework for the creation and legitimation of children's literature, but also determined its stages of development. The fact that children's literature relied on the legitimation of the educational establishment, which also served as its contiguous frame of reference, accounts for a recurring pattern typical of all beginnings of official children's literatures: the first official books for children were ABC books, primers, and horn books whose main goal was to teach the child how to read, primarily for religious purposes and in accordance with a certain religious-educational doctrine. Children (first of the nobility, then of the bourgeoisie, and later of the poor as well) were taught how to read, so as to enable them to read the Scriptures by themselves.

Once children mastered reading, however, it became impossible to control their reading material and to determine what they should read, and more significantly, what they should not read. The existing official books for children had little, if any, appeal: they were far too moralistic to be interesting and far too dull.

The process of the emergence of this new system was a tedious one. For rather a long time, the new boundaries between the adult and the children's literary systems were blurred and unclear (see Shavit, 1990). More than one hundred years were needed for cultural consciousness to register the existence of new borders, and more than one hundred and fifty years were needed to make them into a set of *distinct* and *unequivocal* oppositions--that is to say, to make the systemic affiliation definitive. Only toward the middle of the nineteenth century did the systems become *exclusive*: a text could enter either one or the other system. Until then, the pattern of shared elements continued to exist side by side with the new pattern of systems which excluded each other.

The Function of Chapbooks

As a result of the new notion of the child and of childhood, a new reading public came into being in society and a new demand for children's books emerged on the literary scene. This demand could not as yet be supplied in full by the educational establishment, who regarded reading as a gateway to higher religious enlightenment, but absolutely not as a means of entertainment or pleasure. A new function was therefore created in the literary system--the function of supplying reading material to a new reading public, which the existing elements of the official system could not fulfill (Altick, 1975).

The vacuum thus created in the system was filled by an unexpected source: the nonofficial adult literature of the time, that is to say, chapbooks, which children evidently found very appealing (Ashton, 1882; Neuberg,

1968, 1969, 1972, 1977). Quietly creeping into the system, chapbooks largely bore the function of reading material for children. They continued to do so unnoticed for quite a long time, until the notion of children's reading became preponderant in societal consciousness (Darling, 1968).

Officially, the first texts to fill this vacuum were primers and some religious treatises. Unofficially, however, the task was taken over by chapbooks.

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." (cited by Muir, 1969, 23; Darton, 1958, 33)

This is Sir Richard Steele's description, in the *Tatler* of 1709, of his godson's reading material. Sir Richard Steele was not the only one to describe children's reading material in this manner. Similar evidence can be found in almost all European writers of the eighteenth century when they describe their childhood. Be it Boswell or Goethe, all remembered with much nostalgia the chapbooks they used to read in their childhood. In *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe wrote: "We children therefore had the good fortune to find daily on the little table in front of the second hand bookseller's doorway these precious remnants of the Middle Ages: *Eulenspiegel*, *The Four Sons of Aymon*, *Fair Melusine*, *Kaiser Octavian*, *Fortunatus*--the whole bunch, right down to *The Wandering Jew*; everything was there for us" (cited by Hürlimann, 1967, xii-xv).

The Struggle over Reading Material for Children

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 about the reading of chapbooks by children. On the contrary, the more important the child's education (and consequently his reading matter) became, the less the educational establishment was ready to accept children's reading of chapbooks. When the religious establishment began to scrutinize the education of children as well as their reading material, chapbooks had to retreat underground.

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

articles, however. Major efforts were simultaneously made to overcome the reliance on chapbooks through offering children alternative reading material. These texts, written as the answer to chapbooks, played an important role in enriching the repertoire of official books for children. Thus, out of the competition over children's free time and reading habits emerged a more heterogeneous and diverse system of books for children (Brockman, 1982).

Various Schools of Education and Their Imprint on Children's Literature

Various establishments were involved in the production of official books for children. The new educational system was at first monopolized, as well as institutionalized, by the religious establishment, which was in the best position to supply the newly recognized demands of the schools. The first official books published by various organizations of the Church, mostly by the Puritans, were designed to teach principles of religion. They laid heavy stress on the acquisition of morals and operated on the basis of the assumption that through books (necessarily religious in nature) the child would be disciplined along the path of learning and godliness.

Very soon, however, children's reading matter was constructed on the basis of new models of writing founded on different educational views. These new models emerged from two sources: the commercial and the moralist school of education. The moralist school of education developed during the Age of Reason and was rooted in the writings of either Locke or Rousseau. As an educational doctrine, it gradually acquired a status equal to that of the Puritan approach. Subsequently, it replaced it at the center of official literature for children.

Unlike the Puritans who believed children were sinful by nature, the moralists held the task of education to be the shaping of the child's soul and spirit, and hence the determination of his future role in society. Accordingly, education was allotted a major place in man's life as never before. Moreover, since books were considered the main tools in the process of education, a large demand for them arose, encouraging a change in the existing texts for children.

The most significant change initiated by the moralist school lay in the new *raison d'être* of children's books. Unlike the Puritans whose *raison d'être* was to teach children how to read in order to improve their comprehension of the Scriptures, the new school of education considered books to be the most appropriate means for accommodating Locke's demand for the fusion of amusement and instruction. Reading was regarded as the best means not for mastering the Scriptures, but rather for achieving several other educational goals.

As a result, two new models were introduced into the system: the fable and the moral tale. The first, the fable, required the accommodation of an existing model to the one legitimized by Locke. The second, that of the

moral tale, required the creation of a new model, which was deeply rooted in the Rousseauian doctrine.

As new educational doctrines paid increasing attention to children's reading, children's books began to change. These doctrines allotted to children's reading a much larger space, regarding it as something more than merely a vehicle for achieving religious goals. The homogeneous nature of official books for children was replaced by the variety of texts offered to the child: moral stories, animal stories, instructive stories, primers, and readers were gradually introduced into the system. Their presence in the market attracted commercial publishers, who were catalyzing a whole new field of publishing for children.

Commercial Publishing for Children

Once the establishments involved in the education of the child became aware of the child's reading (Darling, 1968), and once commercial publishing discovered the huge potential of this market, they began to compete with and challenge children's actual reading material. Out of this competition, a heterogeneous and stratified system of books for children emerged in European cultural life.

Commercial publishers 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 on the other, 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.

A typical example of this process is the case of John Newbery, the first commercial publisher who was successful in building a solid publishing business for children. The case of John Newbery is too well known to be repeated here. I would only like to point to his effort to appeal both to the child and to the adult at the same time. Newbery tried to appeal to the child by offering him an alternative to his reading of chapbooks, without losing his advantage over the chapbooks, namely, without violating the values of educators and parents. Newbery was aware of the existing inventory of books for children--chapbooks, lesson books, manuals of good advice, and Aesop's fables--and attempted to use elements of each in order to enhance the competitive capacity of his books as much as possible. In his books, he combined elements of chapbooks which appealed to the child, with morality which appealed to the parent and the teacher (see, e.g., Newbery 1966).

The History of Little Goody Two Shoes, for instance, is a variation on the prohibited tale of Cinderella, which could be found at that time only in the form of chapbooks. It is a story of an unfortunate girl from a good family who suffers many trials and tribulations, but eventually marries the heir of

the manor and becomes its noble lady. Furthermore, the heroine, Margery, is involved in strange adventures, including the accusation of witchcraft, typical of chapbooks.

Newbery's use of illustrations is his most noticeable strategy, however. He borrowed from chapbooks in order to compete with them. The use of illustrations attracted much attention and, from that time onward, became an indispensable feature of children's books. Newbery was followed by other publishers who also used illustrations in their children's books and who introduced several additional models of writing for children.

Competition with Chapbooks

As a result of the constant competition with chapbooks, commercial publishing for children had become an established branch of the publishing field by the end of the eighteenth century. Newbery's books had become a model that other commercial publishers sought to imitate. The introduction of both the commercial element and new educational views led to a change in the official system. Gradually, children's literature became stratified and subject to competition between competing elements and competing systems: the official and the nonofficial system of books for children.

Although the various establishments involved in the production of books for children had different motivations and endeavored to achieve different goals, they did share one common denominator: they all tried to compete with chapbooks.

All publishers of books for children attempted to challenge chapbooks, as is clear from the case of Newbery mentioned above. Most interesting, however, is the case of religious publishing for children which, despite its rejection of chapbooks, could not afford to ignore them and actually used them in its writing of books for children. This was, for instance, the case of Hannah More, a philanthropist and great Sunday School supporter. She regarded the spread of chapbooks as a genuine danger to the education of the child and thus to society. Hannah More was the first to understand that there was a need to produce books not on a sporadic basis, but rather to produce a whole literature for children (and the poor). She also believed it imperative to replace what she regarded as crude chapbooks (as well as the current political pamphlets that were then consumed by masses of working-class readers). More urged her evangelical friends at Chapham Common to provide the poor with proper reading material. Aided greatly by their financial support, her efforts proved successful, and in March 1795 the first of the Cheap Repository Tracts was ready.

In the production of these tracts, a steady effort was made to challenge all possible components of chapbooks and to present alternatives to them. In order to compete with chapbooks, the device of serialization was used, enhanced by the familiar format of chapbooks, as well as by woodcut illustrations. Some tracts 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*, and *Robert and Richard; or The Ghost of Poor Molly, Who Was Drowned in Richard's Mill Pond*.

Tract writers strove to compete with chapbooks by also adopting familiar chapbooks genres and subordinating them to didactic teaching. Poem-like texts (*The Carpenter; or, The Danger of Evil Company*) were intended to replace bawdy ballads, while Histories (*Tawny Rachel; or, The Fortune Teller*) were to replace frivolous romances and adventures. Even sensational books and manuals 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. Crimes were never, of course, romanticized in religious tracts (as they were, for instance, in *Robin Hood*), but they were used to teach the right lesson: criminals were always punished. Even ghosts, the slandered heroes of chapbooks, were used for religious purposes. Thus, for instance, in *The Deceitfulness of Pleasure*, the appearance of a ghost, the former sinful lady, brings the heroine Catherine back to religious life.

Most interesting was the manner in which the tracts used fairy tales. 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. A solution to this conflict was found in the following manner: fairy tales themselves were never included in tracts, but their literary model was transferred to an instructive tale. That is, the fairy tale was transformed into a religious power, while giants and wild beasts were replaced by dishonesty, gambling, and alcoholism. In *Madge Blareny, the Gypsy Girl* (1797), for instance, a poor girl has to fight single-handed against the wild beast (the drunken and sinful gypsies). She is eventually saved by religion, which keeps her from falling into sin like her mother. In this manner chapbooks not only set in motion the production of books for children, but also determined to a large extent the nature and character of the texts themselves.

Summary

My discussion of the emergence of the system of children's literature in the eighteenth century describes the scheme of the historical process through which new boundaries between adult and children's readerships were drawn.

When children's literature began to emerge, the new boundaries were at first partial and ad hoc. 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 literary system. In order for the new boundaries to stabilize, there evolved a need to

find elements for the new functions, in order to distinguish between the two systems.

These elements were generated through the transplantation of new functions onto existing (sometimes even reluctant) elements; through the translation of old functions into new ones; through the creation of new elements; and through the adaptation of existing elements. The first three procedures characterized the operations of the official system, while the last one was typical of the nonofficial system, which formed the basis of the stratification of the new system of books for children.

Even after the new boundaries had been culturally recognized, and even after they became distinct (the discrepancy between these two stages was rather extensive), they never remained the same. The relations between the boundaries have always been dynamic; the systemic opposition between children's literature and adult literature continues to be one of the most prominent oppositions in the literary polysystem, but its concrete manifestations change from one period to another, thus reshuffling the boundaries. The function of distinguishing between adult and children's literature has changed historically as well, although this change was much slower and required many decades before it was accepted and recognized by culture.

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Children's Literature as a Cultural Code: A Semiotic Approach to History

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The historical approach to literature inevitably tends to be descriptive. Since children's literature research on the whole lags behind the general literary criticism, the descriptive tendency is all the more evident in the field. It is very difficult to construct acceptable models of the historical development of children's literature, whether it be a national literature or a general outline or a study of a concrete period. We must therefore try to search for adequate methods in other fields of research. One that I have found quite fruitful is the modern semiotics of culture, as understood by the Russian semiotic school and presented in the works of Yury Lotman.¹

Thus interpreted, the history of children's literature can be seen as a succession of changing cultural codes. The notion of the cultural code implies in this case that children's literature presents a code, or a system of codes (a "semiosphere"), different from those in adult or mainstream literature. The unique feature of children's texts, as compared to mainstream literature, is the presence of *double* code systems, which may be called the children's code and the adult code.

The most important aspect of semiosphere is its dynamic character. In other words, the children's code and the adult code change throughout history, converging, diverging, and overlapping at various points. For instance, some books regarded as "adult" become part of children's literature and the other way round. In addition, the attitude toward children's literature as opposed to mainstream literature varies.

The code shift *within* children's literature implies that central phenomena become at length supplanted by borderline phenomena. When *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger appeared in 1951, it was unique, but today it has

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