

□ *Poetics of Children's Literature*. By Zohar Shavit. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986. xi + 200 pp. \$25.00.

In this book, Zohar Shavit, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Poetics and Comparative Literature at Tel Aviv University, applies semiotics to an analysis of children's literature, both in terms of its historic development and its characteristics as a contemporary cultural phenomenon. Looking primarily at English and Hebrew children's literature, she seeks to uncover "the universal structural traits and patterns common to all children's literatures" (xi). The results are fascinating, if at times forced.

Shavit advances the thesis that "children's literature is part of the literary polysystem . . . a stratified system in which the position of each member is determined by socioliterary constraints" (x). She finds that children's literature has an inferior status that results both from the inferior standing of the child and from the assumed educational mission of children's literature. According to Shavit, this mission, which dictates that children's literature will respond to society's concept of child's needs and abilities, has also been the field's legitimation since the eighteenth century when publishers first responded to the demand for a suitable alternative to adult chapbooks.

Shavit points out that children's literature is a relatively recent phenomenon, historically occurring only after adult literature had become "a well-established institution." Adhering to the well-known thesis of Philippe Ariès that only around the sixteenth century did childhood come to be regarded as a significantly different state from adulthood, Shavit argues that this new conceptualization of childhood as separate and unique was a necessary step in the development of children's literature. To prove her thesis that "concepts of childhood determined the character of the texts produced for the child" (7-8), in the first chapter she compares three different versions of "Little Red Riding Hood": the one published by Perrault in France in 1697, a Grimm Brothers' version from the early nineteenth century, and three versions selected at random from the many produced in the twentieth century. The first, which combines elements of the oral tale and children's language with an erotic description of Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed, a tragic ending, and an ironic moral about the dangers of "loups doucereux" ("sweetish wolves"), signals both the sophisticated salon highbrow—the "real" audience—and the child reader, the "official addressee." In the Grimms' version, the innocent child learns a lesson of obedience and, with the grandmother, manages to defeat the wolf. Twentieth-century popular versions most strikingly

avoid violence involving the grandmother or the child. Thus, following Ariès, Shavit shows that these three versions have been shaped in part by society's changing attitudes towards children: a "coddling" attitude in which they were principally regarded as a source of amusement; a "rational" or "educational" attitude in which adults assumed responsibility for their upbringing; and a "protective" attitude prevalent today.

Shavit argues that because children's authors must work within the constraints of society's notions of what is good for the child's development and what the child is capable of understanding, they suffer from a low self-image with respect to other members of the literary profession. She cites several authors who claim they do not consciously write for children—for instance, Scott O'Dell: "Books of mine which are classified officially as books for children were not written *for* children" (40)—and interprets these remarks as proof that the speaker is aware of an inferior status. While it is hard to deny that the position of children's literature within the literary polysystem is inferior at the present time—and Shavit does produce other evidence such as its absence from most university English departments—her interpretation of a comment such as O'Dell's seems arbitrary out of context. Shavit cites examples of normative evaluations that have contributed to the awarding of prizes in children's literature and insists that it is "the educational and not the literary value of the book which merits praise" (36). With such a statement she ignores an award such as the Phoenix Award of the Children's Literature Association (of America) for which "high literary quality" is a specific stipulation. Furthermore, a statement such as hers suggests a dichotomy between educational and literary values—values which might instead be argued as mutually reinforcing.

Shavit observes that a children's author has a uniquely difficult task, being "perhaps the only one who is asked to address one particular audience and at the same time to appeal to another" (37). She contends that while most children's authors manage to work within these constraints, others address primarily one audience or the other, thus creating a further stratification of children's literature. "Ambivalent" texts such as *Alice in Wonderland* or *Winnie-the-Pooh* combine models from both adult and children's texts; only the adult reader can fully "realize" such a work. Because of their immense appeal to adults, such books move straight to the canon's center and engender imitations. At the other extreme, Shavit sees books such as those in the Nancy Drew series; although extremely popular with children, they are excluded from the canon because of their disregard for the supervising adult reader.

One aspect of loose stratifications within children's literature that

Shavit ignores almost completely is that of age. The field, as it is generally defined, extends through the mid-teens. And while Shavit's observation that a children's author is bound by society's notions of what is good for a child and what a child can comprehend still pertains, one need only regard the critical (i.e., adult) and popular success of contemporary author Robert Cormier to realize that the ability of an adolescent to deal with irony, complicated textuality, and unpleasant endings permits far greater freedom in these areas than that experienced by the writer for an elementary-school-aged child.

Shavit's book is intelligent and wide in its sweep. Having pointed to the constraints within which writers for children work, it paves the way for an enhanced appreciation of the art with which many meet the challenge. Further, in identifying children's literature as part of the literary polysystem, she legitimizes the study of children's literature as *literature*. The next decade may well see the subject moving increasingly into departments of English.

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□ *Vigny: Les Destinées*. By Keith Wren. Critical Guides to French Texts 44. London: Grant and Cutler Ltd., 1985. 98 pp.

□ *Camus: L'Envers et l'Endroit and L'Exil et le Royaume*. By Peter Dunwoodie. Critical Guides to French Texts 47. London: Grant and Cutler Ltd., 1985. 81 pp. Paper \$4.95.

□ *Beckett: Molloy*. By Michael Sheringham. Critical Guides to French Texts 48. London: Grant and Cutler Ltd., 1985. 88 pp.

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"Critical Guides to French Texts" are available in the United States from Longwood Publishing Group, Inc., Wolfeboro, NH.

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The present volume on Vigny has been preceded by a wide variety of studies ranging from Rosemarie Jones's presentation of *L'Étranger* and *La Chute* to Peter Noble's treatment of Bérroul's *Tristan* and the *Folie de Berne*. Vigny's *Chatterton*, treated by Robin Buss, has already appeared in the series.

The scholarly apparatus that accompanies the monograph is modest but adequate for the scope of the study. The author discusses the different editions of *Les Destinées*, justifying his use of A. Jarry's edition in the Gallimard "Poésie" series as the basis for his discussion. There is also a short bibliography that features the standard critical books