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### Meesterwerken met ezelsoren

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# Summary

## Dog-eared masterpieces

### *Adaptations of literary classics for children 1850-1950*

Adaptations of the ‘classics’, which were originally not specifically written for children, form a substantial proportion of children’s literature in the genre’s history. However, the texts themselves are often considered as being of secondary worth. Indeed these books often remain very local, are seldom translated and are mostly written by what are regarded as second-rate authors. They depend heavily on the rapidly changing ideas about the child and child education, which causes them to die out quickly after the first publication to make room for a new, more up-to-date adaptation of the same source text. They could therefore be defined as a form of ‘written folklore’; written material which conforms not to the transmissional norms of ‘literature’ but to that of ‘folklore’.

One could reasonably question, however, if characters like Robinson, Gulliver, Don Quichot or Reynard the Fox would be so strongly rooted in our national and international memories if it had not been for these quickly outdated retellings for children throughout the years, that provided each generation with new heroes – heroes that, even though they carry the same names as their ancestors, differ from them as much as family members can differ from each other. Consequently, from a historical perspective, the flexible character of the texts makes them of considerable worth.

Adaptations are agents in the transmission of culture from one generation to another. They have both a representational function and a formative function. They enable children to get to know their cultural heritage, but it is always a selection of that heritage. Only those items that are considered valuable, or useful, are selected. Moreover, in the case of adaptations the selection of literary items also gets manipulated, adapted to the norms and values of the new context in which the stories are to function as stories for children. Besides transmitting culture, both the selection and the manipulation of the selection bring about cultural change; old values are replaced by new values and new ideas about the child as a reader and as a human being influence the way the old stories are retold. This gives adaptations a thoroughly contemporary character; they only suit a particular time and place and when they become out-of-date, they are replaced by a new version. This contemporary character can provide us with a lot of information about the period in which the texts came into being and the context in which they functioned. Adaptations of historical literary texts not only make it possible for the source text to live on as a liter-

ary phenomenon, but can also themselves be considered as social phenomena that might illuminate the cultural construction of notions such as the child, child education, children's literature and literature from the past.

This study aims to shed light on the pedagogical-literary and social embedding of new, Dutch versions of literary 'classics' for children in the production of children's literature between 1850 and 1950. It tries to define the constraints under which the texts functioned at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century by describing both the poetical and institutional embedding of the genre as well as giving an account of the analyses of the actual texts within the historical context, focusing on several striking variants.

Adapting world literature for children goes back to the chapbook tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, when the appropriateness of a version for children was already mentioned in some of the titles of the chapbooks. After setting out the point of departure, the theoretical framework and the approach of this research in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 shows how the discussion about adapting already existing stories for children had its origins in the nineteenth century, when the discussion about 'good' literature for children started to take shape. Initially the discussion was mostly occupied by the question of the desirability of adapting fairy- and folktales for children. On the one hand there was a supposed connection between the tales and the child, on the other hand many people considered the original versions unsuitable for children.

At the end of the nineteenth century the discussion about adaptation drifted away from fairy- and folktales and started to concentrate on the so-called 'classics', canonized world literature that was alternately defined as 'good', 'old' or 'popular'. In relation to children the literary classic gained an additional meaning: originally not (specifically) written for children, but certainly eagerly read by them. Apart from the repository of anonymous folklore and real children's classics from the nineteenth century (books specifically written for children), articles and books on children's literature mostly mentioned: *Reynard the Fox*, *Tijl Uilenspiegel*, *Don Quichot*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's travels* and *Baron von Münchhausen*.

The discussion about adapting these stories for children concerned the choice of the source text, the question whether it was acceptable to fiddle with great works of art and, if so, how the texts should be adapted. Answers to these questions were based on the function that was appointed to the reading by, and adaptation for children of the literary masterpieces. Five functions can be distinguished. The first function was a historical literary function. This equated to an educational function, which was based on the conviction that children should get to know their cultural heritage. The second function was an esthetic function; literary masterpieces would mould the esthetic awareness in children, which, in turn, would serve the development of an ethical conscience. The third function was the value of the moral message of the original stories. The fourth function consisted of the preparation for living in the 'real world' by increasing the social awareness of the child. The fifth

function was entertainment. Most views were a combination of two or more functions. However, inquiries into the literary taste of young readers in the course of the twentieth century did put some question marks over the results of the efforts of writers and educators; children did not seem particularly fond of adaptations of classics.

Nevertheless, the production of adaptations hugely increased at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, as discussed in Chapter 3. This corresponded with the total increase of literature and children's literature due to technical innovations and a growing demand for reading material. Hundreds of adaptations from a small group of source texts were published. The classics were changed into all kinds of reading material, from picture books to purified school editions, from plays to hobby books. Publishers took advantage of the classic status of the stories, even publishers that never published for children ventured publishing an adaptation for children. The same holds true for writers; a lot of adaptations were written by occasional writers or writers who usually did not write for children.

A lot of adaptations were published in special series, either series of children's books in general or specific adaptation series. The focus of the sale strategy shifted from the economic to the cultural capital of the reader; the adaptation series were initially presented as cheap reading material, in the first half of the twentieth century the focus shifted to the importance of knowing one's cultural heritage.

In terms of popularity one can say that the most 'popular' adaptations – that is, the adaptations that ran into the most editions, stayed 'alive' longest and were mentioned most on lists of recommended children's books – were written by well known writers for children at that time. However, most of the adaptations simply disappeared after the first edition. They were temporary texts. The adaptations were submitted to a cycle of appearing and disappearing to make room for a more up-to-date version of the same source text, by which they enabled the original stories to live on.

The tension between the old story, the original masterpiece, and its new audience, the children, led to a paradox which is described in Chapter 4. Adaptations were aimed at getting children acquainted with their cultural heritage, but at the same time the stories were changed to such an extent that one might well ask if what was left really represented the original stories. Writers of adaptations found themselves torn between the ideal of faithfully handing over the great works of literature and the constraints of an audience of young readers. Those constraints were based on an image of the child constructed by adults. Parents, teachers and other educators served as the gate keepers between the child and the book. Consequently, writers and publishers of adaptations had to meet their ideas about good books for children, before they could even think of the approval of children themselves.

The manipulation of the original stories concerned both the content and the presentation of the content. Elements of the content, like characters, objects, locations and certain passages, were changed in order to make the story acceptable for young

readers in terms of norms and values. They also served to bring the story closer to the world and the experiences of young readers living in another time and place. Formal and structural changes were made to bring the stories in line with the (supposed) cognitive and emotional level of development of the readers. The original stories were organized into smaller units, sentences were made shorter and livelier by using lots of punctuation marks, such as dots and exclamation marks. It is striking how often the narrator and the narrative style of the stories were changed into a far more manipulative style, which either explicitly or implicitly told children what to think of the narrative.

Cultural context adaptation was used a lot to bridge the temporal distance between the old story and its young readers. Naturalizing and neutralizing the narrative reduced the foreignness of the stories. A similar strategy, which can be called 'child naturalization', was used to bring the stories specifically into the world and scope of experiences of the young readers, for example by using a childlike vocabulary and metaphorical images from the world of children. If writers chose to keep the foreignness, they often cultivated the strange elements by using strategies that can be referred to as 'explicit foreignization', when they explicitly added the explanation that the story took place in another time and place, and 'naturalizing foreignization', when they tended to compare the foreign with the familiar.

Text reduction was the adaptation strategy that was used most often. Elements and passages that were chosen for deletion were either elaborations, that did not harm the plot if omitted, or elements and passages that were considered inappropriate for young readers. The stories were purified by simply deleting sexual and scatological elements, subversive elements, religious factors and old ideologies or by merely making subtle references to them that only insiders – i.e. adults – would understand. In this way the rewriters implicitly showed their awareness of the pedagogical requirements of a 'good' children's book.

The adaptation strategies served the accessibility, but most of all the acceptability of the stories as stories for children. Although an esthetic approach toward children's literature was emerging, the adaptations still operated under the primacy of the children's book as an instrument for the socialization of the child. Holding the new versions against the background of current ideologies concerning the education of children, one is able to discern the relationship to contemporary society even more. Chapter 5 and 6 deal with the traces of the evolving nineteenth and twentieth century pedagogical ideas about child rearing and social schemes to impose a certain idea of family life.

The transformation of the classics corresponded chronologically with the leading aims in the pedagogical discourse concerning the formation of the character of the child. The most important pedagogical goal was the development of the ethical conscience of the child. Children needed to train their self-control and willpower to suppress their impulses. This could be developed by practicing obedience. Obedience was considered indispensable for functioning as a good citizen in contem-

porary society. Moreover, to confessional pedagogues a child's obedience to its parents represented its subordination to God. The pedagogical ideal was especially accentuated in those adaptations of *Robinson Crusoe*, which seem to have served as pedagogical examples. The other side of the pedagogical conviction of the manipulability of the improvement of society by the mouldable character of the child was the responsibility of the parents. This is expressed in the adaptations of both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Tijl Uilenspiegel* as the dangers and sad results of overindulgence.

However, the interaction between the old text and the new context was not limited to the pedagogical discourse. Many rewriters expanded their references to a broader social sphere. The nineteenth century cult of the family led to the extension of family scenes in the adaptations. Both the function of the family in the structure of the story and the representation of the social status of the family was manipulated. This corresponded with the social discourse in which The Netherlands were subject to an explicit offensive on morality, which propagated the family as the source of morality, tidiness and sociability, and therefore cultivation. The family was presented as the cornerstone of society. Accentuating the family life of the characters and giving the family the function of the equivalent of a happy ending, the writers of the adaptations drew the stories into the world of their new readers. In some adaptations the dialogue between the old text and the new context was even extended to a critical evaluation of contemporary ideologies such as the cult of the safe and civil family.

The emphasis on character building and the family arose from the conviction that children's literature had a formative function. During the nineteenth, and especially in the beginning of the twentieth century, more and more attention was paid to the taste of the young readers. Both phenomena can be discerned in the way the rewriters dealt with one specific element in the stories: animals, the focus in Chapter 7. Animal teasing was a popular theme in eighteenth century children's books. Although the moral tale was past its peak by the end of the nineteenth century, social organizations for the protection of animals and nature, and societies, that busied themselves with teaching the world and especially children the virtue of compassion and sympathy with all living things, influenced the way animals were treated in the adaptations. Passages that dealt with unacceptable animal treatment were deleted or changed, especially passages in which children treated animals wrongly. Ideas about the easy identification of children with animals, either because they occupied a similar social position in a world ruled by adults, or because children resembled the nature of primitive people who were closer to nature, than the civilized 'modern' man, resulted in the anthropomorphizing of secondary animal characters on the one hand, and gave rewriters of the *Reynard* story a justification for presenting this satire to children on the other. Moreover, kindness to animals became an obvious quality of heroes like Robinson Crusoe, which was in fact an implicit continuation of the old moral.

In conclusion, Chapter 8 claims that adaptations of literary 'classics' for children in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth cen-

tury can be characterized by the typical features of written folklore: the constantly changing compilation of the elements of the original stories; the many different writers who successively but also simultaneously worked on the same material, each giving it its own personal sound in harmony with contemporary ideas about the child, child education, children's books and literary masterpieces; the cycle of appearing and disappearing of different versions of the same story, enabling the original story to keep its place in the centre of (children's) literature. It all resulted in a repository of adaptations to suit all tastes – initially chiefly the tastes of adults concerned with the education of children, but increasingly also the tastes of children themselves, that is, if their tastes were reflected by the popular genres for children. A lot of the rewritings took the shape of prevailing genres for children, like adventure stories, boyish books, animal stories or fantasy. It was almost like the motion of a pendulum: the adaptations took the shape of these genres, while their sources, the original stories that they stemmed from, actually belonged to the chief representatives, sometimes even the prototypes, of these genres, like fables, Robinsonades and imaginary travel stories. To become reading material for children, the source texts fell back on their own derivatives.