Was a New Polish Translation of Hans Christian Andersen’s Fairy Tales and Stories Necessary?

Abstract: A positive answer to the above question seems obvious after a critical analysis of the reception of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales and stories in Poland in the second part of the 19th century and in the first part of the 20th century. On the one hand, over a hundred years ago the writer was classified as an author of children’s literature due to intended or unintended misinterpretations of his prose. This classification was then inherited by next generations of readers and translators. On the other hand, numerous translatory mistakes depleted Andersen’s unique style. This article demonstrates how Andersen’s narration was changed to traditional literary style, especially when it came to dialogues; how humour and irony were overlooked, misunderstood or judged improper for children; how translators miscomprehended Danish grammar and vocabulary; and how little attention was paid to the coherence of the text. The article compares the complete edition of 167 fairy tales and stories translated from Danish (Sochańska 2006) and the complete edition of 155 fairy tales and stories translated from German (Beylin and Iwaszkiewicz 1956), which has enjoyed a canonical status. The comparison not only indicates the difficulties in translating Andersen; it also demonstrates how his prose could be restored to its original shape and how it could again address both young and adult readers.

Keywords: adaptation, proper names, titles, translation series

When the first of my articles on Andersen’s fairy tales was published in the Polish literary periodical Odra in 2005, one of the eminent translators responded with aversion to my critical comments on the translation by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, “A translator should not criticise other translators.” The implication, I assumed then, was that a new translation should stand on its own merits, and criticism of the older translation should be prompted...
by it and expressed by third parties. Yet several years have passed now and no such criticism has emerged; there are still people who express their marked preference for the canonical translation. It is more understandable in the case of common readers who are driven by sentiment, but it is less justifiable when such views are expressed by persons creatively involved in literature.

It took me three years to find a publisher for a new translation of Andersen’s fairy tales and stories. The main hindrance was publishers’ conviction that a new version was not necessary, since “we can boast the best foreign rendition of Andersen’s fairy tales.” Someone once wrote so, nobody knows why, and the opinion lives on. As does the adjective “canonical.”

I have discussed elsewhere how translations have depleted the reception of Andersen’s work (cf. Bibliography); here I shall attempt to prove my theses with the help of more extensive material, referring back to the original. The choice of examples was challenging due to their sheer number – dozens of sheets with quotations. Why did I compile them at all? After the first encounters with publishers, I started to make comparative analyses of selected fairy tales. I divided errors and inaccuracies in the canonical translation into categories. Then, while working on my translation, which took several years, I was constantly approached by Maria Bosacka, an excellent editor working for the Media Rodzina publishing house, who, acting in good faith, pointed out differences between the translations in order to prevent me from making mistakes. While that kind of confrontation was undoubtedly valuable for both of us, it was often so shocking that eventually I decided to record the differences. The comparisons listed below are a perfect illustration of the difficulty involved in translating Andersen’s works. I hope they will prove how important it is for the translator to precisely render the intricacies of the writer’s workshop in order to convey the spirit of his prose and match his artistic achievement.

**On Andersen’s prose**

Andersen’s characteristic style has been extensively discussed. Translators, too, have voiced their opinions, but in most cases their renditions did not reflect their awareness of the writer’s literary merit and his deviations from the literary norm. As a proper Romantic, Andersen was fascinated by the fairy world and by the child theme. He sought the causes of evil in the pro-