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THE TRANSLATOR’S WIFE’S TRACES: ALMA CARDELL CURTIN AND JEREMIAH CURTIN

Abstract: Jeremiah Curtin translated most works by Poland’s first literary Nobel Prize winner, Henryk Sienkiewicz. He was helped in this life-long task by his wife Alma Cardell Curtin. It was Alma who, after her husband’s death, produced the lengthy Memoirs she steadfastly ascribed to her husband for his, rather than hers, greater glory. This paper investigates the possible textual influences Alma might have had on other works by her husband, including his travelogues, ethnographic and mythological studies, and the translations themselves. Lacking traditional authorial evidence, this study relies on stylometric methods comparing most frequent word usage by means of cluster analysis of z-scores. There is much in this statistics-based authorial attribution to show how Alma Cardell Curtin affected at least two other original works of her husband and, possibly, at least two of his translations as well.

Keywords: Sienkiewicz, Cardell, Curtin, stylometry, authorship attribution, multivariate analysis, cluster analysis, Delta

The Problem

The paradox of the reception of Henryk Sienkiewicz, Poland’s first literary Nobel Prize winner (1905), in the English-speaking world consists neither in the fact that he “never saw a penny” from most of his foreign publishers (Mikoś 1994: 133), nor in his greater popularity in the distant United States than in the United Kingdom. What is strangest about his popularity is that he owed it to the very mediocre if very numerous translations by Jeremiah Curtin (1835–1906), diplomat, lumber trader, ethnographer,
globetrotter, polyglot and generally a very ubiquitous man. Born in Detroit as a son of Irish (hence, obviously, Catholic) immigrants, he grew up on his family’s farm at Greenfield (now part of Milwaukee, WI). He studied in a much less Catholic way at Harvard, devoting most of his interest to learning languages one after another, especially Russian, and graduated to join the American embassy in St. Petersburg as Secretary (1864). His knowledge of the tongue of the Tolstoys made him highly popular in the aristocratic and administrative circles of the capital of the Russian Empire, but it was this popularity that might have been the reason for his conflict with Ambassador Cassius Clay, which in turn destroyed the young man’s diplomatic career (1869). Curtin then tried to capitalize on his Russian contacts in business; worked as a translator; lectured on Russia in the US. In 1872 he accompanied Great Prince Alexei, the son of Tsar Alexander II, on the goodwill mission to America. He met Alma Cardell in the same year; they married within six months.

Alma Cardell was born in Warren, VT, on March 11th, 1847, in a much more middle-class family. Her father James was a merchant, city councillor and member of the state’s House of Representatives. Her mother, Mary Miranda, sent her to study at the renowned Barre Academy. Before her marriage, Alma worked as a teacher in a Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home in Madison in her future husband’s home state (Collins 2008). Sienkiewicz, a harsh judge of women in general and of American women in particular (“In many respects, American women are inferior to their European sisters (…). American women dress most ostentatiously, [with] little taste but much display. (…) They are such bold, provocative coquettes that truly the roles of the sexes have been reversed and here the woman is the aggressor. (…) The rumours circulating in Europe about the education of American women are much exaggerated.” Sienkiewicz 1959: 26), would have been pleased: “women teachers in the United States perform a real mission” (Sienkiewicz 1959: 49).

When Alma became Mrs Curtin, she immediately discontinued her “mission” and since then accompanied her husband in almost all of his travels and ventures. Ostensibly brought up as a typical 19th-century “Angel in the House,” she had to make do without the house, living in hotels all over the world or with her family during the Curtins’ ever-shorter stays

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1 I have written more extensively on Curtin in “Sienkiewicz po angielsku” (Sienkiewicz in English) Przekładaniec 15 (2/2005) 101–126.
in their country. She acquired her bit of real estate only on her peripatetic husband’s death. They first travelled together to the Caucasus, where Jeremiah tried his hand in the lumber trade. The Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878) broke out; unlike Wokulski, the protagonist of Bolesław Prus’s novel The Doll (1889), Curtin failed to make his fortune there and, running out of options, he returned to America, where he eventually found a job as ethnographer at the Smithsonian (1883). Alma Curtin participated in her husband’s studies on Native American languages, first on the East Coast and then in California. She helped him collect his material and edited his notes. She performed the function of her husband’s amanuensis not only until his death, but also until her own. Naturally, she also played a similar part in her husband’s work on translations: Sienkiewicz (most novels, novellas and short stories), Orzeszkowa (The Argonauts, 1901), Prus (The Pharaoh, 1902), Józef Potocki (Hunting Sport in Somaliland, 1900), Gogol (Taras Bulba, 1888), Zagoskin (Tales of Three Centuries, 1891) and Alexei Tolstoy (Prince Serebryani, 1892), as well as on his ethnographic studies: “Indian” (Creation Myths of Primitive America in Relation to the Religious History and Mental Development of Mankind, 1898; Myths of the Modocs, 1912), “Irish” (Myths and Folk-lore of Ireland, 1890; Hero-Tales of Ireland, 1894; Tales of the Fairies and of the Ghost World, Collected from Oral Tradition in South-west Munster, 1895) and “Slavic” (Myths and Folk-tales of the Russians, Western Slavs, and Magyars, 1890). She went on to publish three “Mongolian” items after Jeremiah’s death: The Mongols: A History (1908), The Mongols in Russia (1908), A Journey in Southern Siberia: The Mongols, Their Religion, and Their Myths (1909). She also reedited the material her husband had gathered among the Seneca (Seneca Indian Myths, 1923), previously published by J.N.B. Hewitt as Seneca Fiction, Legends, and Myths (1918). And while Curtin’s translations were a much greater success (above all, in financial terms) than his own studies, some of the latter went into several editions and one book, The Mongols: A History (with a foreword by the author’s friend, Theodore Roosevelt), was even translated into Japanese.

The Memoirs of Jeremiah Curtin (1940), published after the death of Alma Cardell Curtin, is the most important source of information about Sienkiewicz’s translator – important yet controversial. As has been shown by Michał Jacek Mikoś, the chief authority on the subject, Curtin’s widow is the true author. The professor at University of Wisconsin-Madison has proved that virtually all of Curtin’s alleged diary is in fact a collection of
statistical formulae. Tree diagrams drawn by stylometrists yield more than just stylistic similarities; they try to decipher differing influences of editors, secretaries, other writers… With various degrees of success, but still.

What about the impact of translators? Existing studies show that stylistic traces of the translator are not at all easy to find. There is, in translation, still more of the original author than that of his target-language alter ego, who seems to fulfil the (in)famous postulate of invisibility. With a single exception: works by a single original author translated by various translators. Then the translator is visible, and so is his wife – even when her partner, her own attitude, social conventions, financial reasons, practices of publishers, copyright reasons try to hide her from our view.

trans. Jan Rybicki

Bibliography


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**Jan Rybicki** works as an adjunct at the Institute of English Philology, Jagiellonian University, Kraków. His research areas include: translation studies, comparative literature, stylometry. He has written studies about Henryk Sienkiewicz in various English-speaking countries (the reception analyses were conducted both by traditional and computer-based methods). He has also translated into Polish over twenty novels by such authors as Coupland, Fitzgerald, Golding, Gordimer, Ishiguro, Oe, Le Carré and Winterson.