

Folktales, the Cinderella of Translation

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Translation played a crucial role in the transformation of folktales from oral to written texts during the great wave of collection and publication of oral literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but a role that has largely gone unacknowledged. Particular interest was shown in collecting and translating folktales in “minor” languages, which were believed to have preserved a more vibrant oral tradition than “major” languages. Paradoxically, though, in many cases folktales of minor languages were published first in translation – e.g. Irish folktales in English (Croker 1825); Basque (Cerquand 1875), Breton (Luzel 1887), Occitan (Bladé 1886), Corsican (Ortoli 1883) and Catalan (Chauvet 1899) folktales in French – and only many years later, if at all, in the original. It is often not clear or stated in anthologies that some folktales may have been translated (Delmas and Seignolle 2007; Watkins 2012). Folktales were thus perceived and published primarily as exemplars of universal human creativity, rather than as the literary heritage of specific cultures, and so represented a particularly egregious case of cultural appropriation through translation (Venuti 1995: 19).

This paper will explore issues in the translation of folktales in the nineteenth century, focusing on examples from the British Isles and France:

- Where does translation begin and end in the folktale collection, editing and retelling process?
- How did the cultural context influence the decision to publish folktales only in translation or in some notable exceptions bilingually (e.g. Campbell in Scottish Gaelic) or only in the original (e.g. Mistral in Provençal)?
- How is the tension between the universal and culture-specific reflected in folktale collection, selection and translation strategies?

The research methods used include a study of the publication history of folktales in selected cultures, a study of the prefaces to folktale collections and an analysis of folktale selection and translation strategies.

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