“What do I need Comparative Children’s Literature for?”

Comparative Children’s Literature in the age of globalization
and ‘the infinitely varied mutual contest
of sameness and difference’

Petros Panaou
Assistant Professor of Children’s Literature
University of Nicosia

Abstract

This text is an introduction to the comparative field and its multiple uses and functions, emphasizing its important role within the globalized context of contemporary children’s literature. As more and more groundbreaking research, publications, and conferences focus on issues that pertain to Comparative Children’s Literature, the author of this article believes that more and more experts will be joining the international community of scholars, authors, illustrators, translators, educators, publishers, and librarians who agree that what happens in one ‘national literature’ can no longer be studied or developed in isolation from what takes place in the rest of the world; or indeed from what takes place in other linguistic, cultural, religious and other communities within the same country. In the age of globalization, if we want to grasp the whole picture, we need to cast a much wider, more comparative net. Answering the title’s question--“What do I need Comparative Children’s Literature for?”--the present article points out various ‘uses’ of the comparative field/ tool, stressing that its most important use is its potential to ‘unlock’ the cultural battles between sameness and difference that are so characteristic of contemporary global and local cultures.
As O’Sullivan observes in the above statement (2005: 1), children’s literature has always transcended linguistic and cultural borders. Ever since its inception, literature for children has had simultaneously a nationalizing and a transnationalizing effect. The 18th and 19th century circulation of folk- and fairytales amongst Western European countries is an illustrative example. These collections of stories functioned on the one hand as a means of enhancing a sense of national tradition and identity within young nations, and on the other, by crossing European borders, as agents of intercultural exchange and understanding. Contemporary children’s literature features even more intense and widespread intercultural exchange, making an exciting field for comparative research.

However, Comparative Literature—‘the discipline generally responsible for researching cross-cultural phenomena’—has for a long time underestimated and essentially ignored books written for children (O’Sullivan, 2005: 1). Hence, in spite of the fact that Comparative Literature had been established academically as early as the 19th century, it wasn’t until much later that the first steps towards a Comparative Children’s Literature were taken.

In the same era when one sovereign European nation was founded after the other and literature was being divided into national literatures that reflected national histories and cultures, a ‘counter-discipline to studies of national language and literature’ was also being set in place:

\[W]hereas ‘national’ philologies concentrated exclusively on literature within the political borders of the nations concerned, comparative literature, as a kind of corrective measure, dealt with so-called Weltliteratur or ‘world literature.’ (O’Sullivan, 2005: 4)
Goethe (1749-1832) was the first to coin the term ‘Weltliteratur’ (World Literature). He imagined an international republic of letters that would advance civilization by promoting mutual understanding and respect.

Since the nineteenth century, of course, the discipline has undergone some quite dramatic shifts, the most important one being the challenging of the validity of comparisons between ‘pure’ national literatures. The following extended quotation from Djelal Kadir’s ‘Comparative Literature, the Transnational, and the Global’ is quite illuminating:

2. In the history of the discipline, the elements of comparability most commonly have been national literary cultures as differentiated by language, genealogical imaginaries, historical formations, and geopolitical frontiers.

3. Transnationalism complicates comparable differentials as predicated on nation and nationality by throwing into question the commensurability between national formation and literary culture. As a result, the relationship between a nation and a national literature can no longer be viewed unproblematically. (2001: 25)

Kadir then continues to support that currently one is most likely to encounter ‘more than one literary tradition within a given national space’ (2001: 25). As Susan Stan explains in her article for this special issue of KEIMENA, children’s literature in the age of globalization goes global and local at the same time; ‘national’ literatures tend to fade, and in their place one observes the globalized children’s book on the one hand, and the local (Mayan, Gond, Chinese-Canadian, African-American, etc.) on the other.

Scholars of national literatures, such as Paul Jay, professor of English at Loyola University, Chicago, seem to become more and more aware of this:

*English literature is increasingly postnational, whether written by cosmopolitan writers like Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Arundhati Roy, and Nadine Gordimer or by a host of lesser-known writers working in their home countries or in diasporic communities around the world, from Europe and Africa to the Caribbean and North America.* (2001: 33)
Based on these observations, Jay suggests that the study of what have heretofore been treated as national literatures (in curricula and programs) can be more effectively reorganized through an approach that emphasizes literature’s relation to the historical processes of globalization. Robert Eric Livingston seems to agree with him when he writes:

*Literary studies, the disciplined investigation of texts produced or consumed under the sign of literature, has historically inscribed itself in the tension between canonical universals and serial particularity, and these two poles can help frame a first approach to globalization.* (2001: 147)

Livingston’s proposal is especially valid in the case of Children’s Literature, not only because the discipline has historically dealt with issues of universality and specificity, but also because the tension between the local and the global is inscribed both within the processes of globalization and within the functions of children’s literature as a simultaneously nationalizing and transnationalizing force.

For Arjun Appadurai, the central characteristic of global cultural processes is ‘the infinitely varied mutual contest of sameness and difference’:

*Thus the central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thus to proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular.* (2001: 100)

As Susan Stan’s article so eloquently demonstrates in relation to globalization and the picture books, Comparative Children’s Literature is clearly the most appropriate tool to explore children’s literature within this global context; children’s literature within, and as active part of, the global tension between sameness and difference. Comparative approaches inevitably lead to accounts of similarities and difference, as well as analyses of relevant literary phenomena and
processes. Sameness and difference are present in every word the American Comparative Literature Association has used to define Comparative Literature:

*The space of comparison today involves comparisons between artistic productions usually studied by different disciplines; between various cultural constructions of those disciplines; between Western cultural traditions, both high and popular, and those of non-Western cultures; between the pre- and postcontact cultural productions of colonized peoples; between gender constructions defined as feminine and those defined as masculine, or between sexual orientations defined as straight and those defined as gay; between racial and ethnic modes of signifying; between hermeneutic articulations of meaning and materialist analysis of its modes of production and circulation; and much more.* (Bernheimer, 1995: 41f)

All of the above comparisons take place within a paradigm that has managed to free itself from the limiting concept of ‘national’ literatures; a paradigm that reaches for ideas, connections, influences, and comparisons across national borders, grouping books together with reference to other criteria, in addition to that of their country of origin. Even though Children’s Literature studies do examine most of the above-mentioned areas in relation to children’s books, most scholars in the field chose to limit their analysis within one ‘national’ literature.

An encouraging *transnational* development, taking place during the past fifteen years or so, has been the collaboration between Children’s Literature scholars for the purposes of European or international projects. I can attest from personal experience to the comparative philosophy at the heart of such projects, as well as to their educational and academic value. For instance, the European Picture Book Collection II (EPBC II - [www.epbcii.org](http://www.epbcii.org)) is an EU funded, Comenius Multilateral Project, which builds on experiences from a previous EPBC collection, making available to educators, students, and scholars more than 60 picture books from all 27 EU states and the ethnic, linguistic or religious groups within them. Intercultural dialogue is central in EPBC II, as its users are encouraged to read the diverse visual stories (several of them on-line) by bringing them into a constructive dialogue with each other, and exploring their cultural
backgrounds. Participants discuss the various picture books from the collection in a comparative manner, identifying cultural, linguistic, literary, and pictorial similarities and differences, and appreciating the value of diversity.

European Mobility Folktales (EUMOF - http://www.eumof.unic.ac.cy) is yet another EU funded, Comenius Multilateral Project, which compiles a collection of European folktales that pertain to travelling to ‘foreign’ lands and encountering ‘different’ peoples and cultures. Academics and educators who collaborate in this exciting project are designing educational material and related pedagogical strategies that strengthen intercultural education and inclusion practices, promoting the mobility of people, stories, languages, ideas, and good educational practices. In addition to their educational value, collections like EUMOF, EPBC, and EPBC II offer wonderful opportunities for comparative scholarly work. O’Sullivan stresses that,

" [...] comparative children’s literature must address all relevant intercultural phenomena, such as contact and transfer between literatures, and the representation of self-images and images of other cultures in the literature of a given language. (2005: 12)"

Scholars working comparatively with texts from European or international collections are enabled to delve into the kind of work that O’Sullivan describes (Cotton, 2000; Panaou, 2009a, 2009b, 2008a, 2008b, 2006).

Paul Hazard was perhaps the first to implement a comparative approach in the analysis of children’s books. A leading figure in the field of comparative studies, Hazard wrote Les livres, les enfants et les hommes [Books, children and men (meaning adults)] in 1932, at a time when Children’s Literature in general hardly existed as an academic field:

"Although his approach may have been questionable, Hazard none the less addressed comparative aspects of the subject such as differing concepts of childhood, different traditions of children’s literature specific to certain nations, and different mentalities. (O’Sullivan, 2005: 7)"
This very first scholar to write about children’s literature comparatively was already preoccupied with issues of locality and universality, difference and sameness:

Children’s books keep alive a sense of nationality; but they also keep alive a sense of humanity. They describe their native land lovingly, but they also describe faraway lands where unknown brothers live. They understand the essential quality of their own race; but each of them is a messenger that goes beyond mountains and rivers, beyond the seas, to the very ends of the world in search of new friendships. Every country gives and every country receives--innumerable are the exchanges--and so it comes about that in our first impressionable years the universal republic of childhood is born. (Hazard, 1944: 146)

Writing in 1932 (the 1944 date above refers to the English edition), he develops such ideas such as ‘the essential quality of their own race’ or ‘the universal republic of childhood,’ notions that today are hard to accept; nevertheless, the preoccupation with issues of sameness and difference so characteristic of Comparative Children’s Literature, is there.

The end of World War II brought an international appreciation of Hazard’s work on children’s literature, which largely ignored his references to difference amongst national literatures and overemphasized his ideas about a universal republic of childhood. After the devastating effects of nationalism, utopian ideas of international understanding through children’s books were particularly attractive. As Carl Tomlinson explains,

The international children’s literature movement was founded primarily through the efforts of Jella Lepman, a German Jew who fled the Nazi Holocaust of World War II but returned to her devastated homeland immediately after the war. Determined to do something to prevent the recurrence of such destruction, Lepman convinced publishers from all over Europe to donate children’s books for a traveling exhibit. (2003: 1)
What commentators of Lepman’s impressive work usually neglect to mention is that she had ‘returned to her devastated homeland’ as a US Army Major, posted to American headquarters in Bad Homburg as an ‘advisor on the cultural and educational needs of women and children in the American zone’ (Lepman, 1969: 13).

The political goal behind the inception of the International Exhibition of Children’s Books was to ensure that Western Germany would move permanently away from Nazism and join the rest of the Western world in common, peaceful, and prosperous endeavors. Lepman shared Hazard’s vision of a ‘universal republic of childhood,’ as she imagined ‘bridges of books’ connecting children across the globe and bringing into effect the utopia of a united, peaceful world. While most contemporary scholars would agree with the importance of intercultural communication through children’s literature, I suspect that most of us would deem the idea of a ‘universal republic of childhood’ through literature as too romantic and utopian.

Having said that, no one can doubt the value of Jella Lepman’s work, both for German youth and for children across the world. No one can deny her contribution to the advancement of Comparative Children’s Literature either:

> Jella Lepman started her work for children’s books as a means to international understanding and so peace among the nations. But the project encouraged serious consideration of children’s literature; the diffusion on an international scale of information about children’s books was an almost inevitable intellectual consequence. (Morpurgo, 1969: 7)

O’Sullivan agrees with this view:

> However, criticism of the enthusiastic over-estimation of the potential beneficial effects of children’s literature should not make us forget that post-war measures to foster literary exchange in the cause of international understanding did encourage a generally open-minded attitude towards the literatures of other nations. This is
particularly clear from the work of the International Youth Library (IYL) and its founder Jella Lepman. (2005: 9)

Tomlinson considers the IYL as extremely important for international children’s literature. Writing in 2003, he informs us that the IYL—housed in Schloss Blutenburg, a former castle in Munich, Germany—is the world’s largest collection of international children’s literature, with more than five hundred thousand volumes in over one hundred languages. The library promotes international exchange of ideas and information through conferences, exhibitions, and several publications, including the annual publication of *The White Ravens*, a selection of contemporary international children’s books recommended for translation (Tomlinson, 2003: 1). The International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), founded by Lepman and others in 1953, is another organization that supports international exchange of children’s literature and literary criticism through biennial international conferences, its journal (*Bookbird*), and many other activities, publications, and events. According to its official website,

*The International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) is a non-profit organization which represents an international network of people from all over the world who are committed to bringing books and children together.*

(IBBY, 2011)

In spite, then, of the romantic utopianism in Hazard and Lepman’s pacifism through children’s books, their endeavors had an important contribution in transnational communication, exchange of ideas, and cultural understanding between ‘national’ children’s literatures. The decades that followed saw a piquing interest in analyzing international children’s literature through comparative approaches. The ’60s and ’70s saw an interest in translations. The International Research Society for Children’s Literature (IRSCIL) was founded in 1970, and the discussion of children’s literature in comparative terms was extended in the ’80s, through links with Translation Studies and the formation of Polysystem Theory.
However, it is during the past two decades that Comparative Children’s Literature has gained momentum. Since the 1990s, a growing series of academic books, articles, special issues like the current issue of *KEIMENA*, and conferences that focus on comparative themes, demonstrate the peaking interest in comparative aspects of Children’s Literature and the formation of a distinct field of study.

Koelb and Noakes describe Comparative Literature in general as “…less a set of practices … and more a shared perspective that sees literary activity as involved in a complex web of cultural relations” (1988: 11). This description applies to Comparative Children’s Literature to such an extent, that some Children’s Literature scholars practice it without even realizing the comparative nature of their work. In an effort to present a structural proposition for the field of Comparative Children’s Literature, O’Sullivan (2005: 12-51) divides it into the following nine areas of study:

1. **Theory of children’s literature**; meaning the various manners in which the general theory may be used to study comparative aspects.

2. **Contact and transfer studies**; which are concerned with all forms of cultural exchange (translation, reception, multilateral influences, etc.) between literatures from different countries, languages, and cultures.

3. **Comparative poetics**; which includes the examining of culture-specific poetological questions.

4. **Intertextual studies**; looking at retellings, parodies, cross-cultural references, simple and complex forms of interaction between literatures from different languages and cultures.

5. **Intermediality studies**; the field that investigates the relationship between children’s literature and other aesthetic forms (visual arts, dance, music, cinema, the theatre, etc.)

6. **Image studies**; concerned with the literary images of other countries, cultures, or ethnic groups.
7. **Comparative genre studies**; looking at the formation and development of various children’s literature genres within and across cultures and linguistic areas.

8. **Comparative historiography of children’s literature**; interested in the development of children’s literature historical research in different countries, and in the criteria according to which histories and accounts of the various children’s literatures are written.

9. **Comparative history of children’s literature studies**; looking metacritically at culture-specific aspects of the study of children’s literature and the manners in which it is institutionally established in different countries.

Since Elena Xeni, in her article for this issue of *KEIMENA* ‘Issues of Concern in the Study of Children’s Literature Translation,’ conducts a thorough review of major publications and other scholarly work in the field, I will refrain from repeating it here. Instead, I will selectively refer the reader to a small number of recent or upcoming publications on the subject, making also references to some first steps towards the study of Comparative Children’s Literature in the Greek-speaking academic world.

Obviously, a touchstone in the Comparative Children’s Literature discourse has been Emer O’Sullivan’s *Comparative Children’s Literature*. This comprehensive account of the discipline was first published in German and received the biennial IRSLC Award for outstanding research in 2001. Its English edition came out in 2005 and became the standard source of reference. For the purposes of this article, I have quoted heavily from O’Sullivan’s work, as I consider it a solid foundation for all future work within the field. Pat Pinsent’s edited volume, *No child is an island: The case of children’s literature in translation* (2006), coming out of an NCRCL & British IBBY conference, brings together comparative voices from across the globe. Gillian Lathey’s edited volume *The translation of children’s literature: A reader* (2006) is yet another touchstone, focusing on translation-related areas. Maria Nikolajeva’s book
chapter, ‘Translation and Crosscultural Reception’ (2011), is also a valuable text in this area, and can function supplementarily to Xení’s article in this issue of KEIMENA. A promising publication, coming out towards the end of 2011, is Christopher Kelen and Björn Sundmark’s edited volume Nations of Childhood, which addresses both the question of how children’s literature constructs and represents different national experiences, and the challenge presented to the ‘nation-ness’ of children’s literature by the changing/diminishing role of nation-states. Finally, a groundbreaking volume, entitled The translation and reception of Grimms’ fairy tales, providing a systematic history of the translation of Grimms’ tales and their reception outside of Germany, and drawing parallels between the reception in different countries or parts of the world, is currently being edited by Gillian Lathey and Vanessa Joosen and is expected to appear in 2012.

Within the Greek-speaking academia, the discourse is still quite young, but a small group of scholars with an interest in the field is gradually being formed. The Greek translation of O’Sullivan’s Comparative Children’s Literature came out in 2010 as a result of close collaboration between Tasoula Tsilimeni, Petros Panaou, and Elena Xení. Panaou and Tsilimeni also authored a chapter on Greek translations of picture books, which has been published in the Handbook of Research on Children’s and Young Adult Literature (Wolf et al, 2011), presented relevant papers at local and international conferences, and contributed to some of the edited volumes mentioned above, with such chapters such as ‘International Classic Characters and National Ideologies: Pinocchio and Alice in Greece’ or ‘Hansel and Gretel in Greece: A comparative approach to diverse translations and adaptations in Greek.’ As more and more groundbreaking research, publications, and conferences focus on issues that pertain to Comparative Children’s Literature, we believe that more and more experts will also join the international community of scholars, authors, illustrators, translators, educators, publishers, and librarians who agree that what happens in one ‘national literature’ can no longer be studied or developed in isolation from what takes place in the rest of the world, or indeed from what takes place in other linguistic, cultural, religious or other communities
within the same country. In the age of globalization, if we want to grasp the whole picture, we need to cast a much wider, more comparative, net.

Answering the title’s question—“What do I need Comparative Children’s Literature for?”—the present article has pointed out various ‘uses’ of the comparative field/ tool; however, I believe that its most important use is its potential to ‘unlock’ the cultural battles between sameness and difference that are so characteristic of contemporary global and local cultures. Susan Stan and Elena Xení’s articles illustrate some ways in which this may be accomplished. Since, now more than ever, translations and intercultural exchanges, in relation to both literary and theoretical texts, need to be valued and promoted, all articles in this issue are published both in Greek and English.

Works Cited


Childrens literature has transcended linguistic and cultural borders since books and magazines specifically intended for child readers were produced on any kind of scale in 18th century Europe. As it has always evolved from international rather than national paradigms, the subject of childrens literature research cannot therefore be limited to geographically internal texts and [...] those responsible for their production (Bouckaert-Ghesquire 1992: 93). But childrens literature, not traditionally regarded as meriting serious scholarship, has hitherto flown under the radar of Comparative Literat...