The Swedish Adventures of Alice, Gip and Ivanhoe: the Translation of English Children’s Books into Swedish in the 19th Century

Björn Sundmark

Translations of English source texts have dominated the Swedish media economy for almost a hundred years. In Sweden, as in many other European countries, English became the most important language-culture during the 19th century, eventually edging out other high-status languages such as German and French. The process was gradual and complex, and contingent on cultural, political, technical and economical changes. In this article the focus will be on children’s literature: how are English original texts re-situated in a Swedish cultural context? Which translation ideals prevail in these texts? In what way is their “Englishness” made visible and exploited? There are two reasons why I want to investigate the translation of older English children’s literature into Swedish. First, popular genres such as children’s literature have not until recently attracted much scholarly attention; it is an under-researched area. Second, children’s literature as “children’s literature” (i.e. a literature specifically designed for children) very much emerged as an “English” genre; for that reason it is particularly interesting to try to understand how it was established outside the English-speaking world, in a country such as Sweden, in a language such as Swedish.

Although there were books for children prior to the 19th century, these were aimed at an exclusive audience; they were, moreover, geared towards instruction rather than pleasure.
Children’s books as we know it are largely a product of the mid and late 19th century. Romanticism and with it changing views of the child (theological, psychological, educational) as well as the rise of the middle class and cheaper and improved printing techniques paved the way for a new kind of children’s literature. These changes coincided with (and were prompted by) the rise of English. In Sweden, for example, the translation of English children’s surpassed that of Germany in the second half of the 19th century (Torgersson). In my article I will provide some examples of the ways in which different English source texts were introduced in a Swedish context and show how they informed the nascent discourse of children’s literature. The following touchstones will be used: Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, Hesba Stretton’s *Lost Gip*, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, and the first English-inspired Swedish children’s periodical, *Talltrasten* (1866). These books represent different kinds of children’s literature – the historical novel, the social and moral novel of reform, the literary fairy tale (including nonsense rhymes) and the motley assortment of fact and fiction found in periodicals.

In an 1862 article called *Jugendlectüre, Jugendlitteratur* the German pedagogue Carl Kühner formulated a position on children’s literature that also influenced the Swedish view of the genre during the 19th C (for a fuller treatment of Kühner, see Klingberg, *Sekelskiftets Barnbokssyn*). The main point of Kühner’s argument is that literature affects children profoundly both aesthetically, morally and practically. On the other hand, children’s literature – and here Kühner is mainly referring to 19th C books – is trivial, untrue, intellectually impoverished and exaggeratedly fantastic. Even worse, children can come down with “reading rage,” a condition characterized by too much un-organized reading.
Ultimately reading rage can be detrimental to a child’s health, and prevent them from being of any practical use (school, household chores). Kühner advocates reading the classics – the Bible, Homer, folk fairy tales, legends – preferably in extenso, but if need be in adaptation and abridgement. This was in line with the then dominant “theory of recapitulation,” which states that the child recapitulates on an individual level the development of the species. Hence, texts belonging to human infancy (such as myths and folk genres) are necessarily the most suitable reading materials for the young mind. Nevertheless, Kühner also includes biography and travel accounts in his list of acceptable reading matter. In Sweden the pedagogues Lars Axel Aulin and Julius Humble introduced these ideas during the second half of the 19th C. Another German pedagogue, Heinrich Wolgast, sharpened the critique of children’s literature in his Das Elend unserer Jugendlitteratur (1896). If Kühner found it possible to adapt the classics to some extent, Wolgast is more forbidding. The rule should be: either a work can be read by children, or they should not read at all.

Wolgast too found sympathetic followers in Sweden. In her list of recommended reading in The Century of the Child (1900), the Swedish writer and leading public intellectual Ellen Key at first seems to accept Wolgast’s argument that children primarily should read canonical adult literature.

The best of our classic authors ought already to be present on the child’s bookshelf; and just like me and many of my generation had done already before twelve years of age, they should be allowed to take invigorating draughts from Tegnér, Runeberg, Mrs Lenngren, Atterbom, Geijer, Nicander, Dahlgren, Miss Bremer among others... As for myself, before my twelfth birthday, I had also read a great deal of Schiller, Goethe and Wieland, Humboldt’s travels and so on, in German; In addition, most of W. Scott, Shakespeare, Macaulay, Dickens and other English authors in translation, as well as several French works in the original. I mention this only to show what a normal child can digest of real literature, in case their parents and teachers are wide enough to supply this fare, instead of holding it back according some graded in-
Several things are worth noting, however. The emphasis here is on Romantic writers (even Shakespeare was introduced in Sweden in the 19th c as a Romantic avant le mot), rather than the writers of the Enlightenment or the Classics – or “the folk” for that matter. Both lyrical and epic poetry make up a formidable part of the designated reading. The selection is also organized according to linguistic and national boundaries, with the Swedish canon preeminently placed. Then Key presents us with her readings from the Big Three – German, English, French – and mentions that she read German and French in the original and English in translation. Already here, I think it is possible to see that English is the emerging source language. No French writers are mentioned, although Key states that she reads French works in the original language. German remains number one on her list – naturalized as a second language even beyond that of English today in Swedish society – but there are as many English as German writers on her list. In the following discussion of fit children’s reading Key departs even further from the Kühner/Wolgast position: “Although I strongly recommend that children be given literature instead of children’s books, here I will nevertheless point out some good examples” (248). She then writes: “Among the books still cherished by the young, one must recommend, for smaller children, “Miss Edgeworth’s Stories, E. Wetherell’s Mr Rutherford’s Children … Louisa Alcott’s An Old-fashioned Girl,[and] Little Women … Finally, all the books by miss Mullock … are the best possible reading for young girls” (256).
Another influential person on the Swedish scene who was inspired by the German theories of children’s reading, but who also departed in significant ways from their thinking was Fridtjuv Berg (pedagogue, publisher and liberal politician at the turn of the century – 1900). Consequently he sees adaptations as preferable to “new” (original) stories for children. Children’s novels are highly suspect, but if a choice has to be made the historical novels of Walter Scott, Fenimore Cooper (USA), BS Ingemann (Denmark) and Zacharias Topelius (Finland) are acceptable (Klingberg 23-24). Given Berg’s aversion to new children’s novels it is interesting that it was Berg who took the initiative to approach Selma Lagerlöf to write *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* as a school reader – a children’s novel if there ever was one! On the other hand, Lagerlöf was not regarded by her contemporaries as a children’s writer, so the choice can also be seen as in line with Wolgast’s and Key’s ideals.

Berg advocates the importance of cultivating the imagination of the child, rather than reining it in, as the German critics propose. In this he is closer to the British position at the time. Theoretically writers and critics like John Ruskin, Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Rigby had taken the moralizing pedagogues to task. Charles Dickens in “Frauds on the Fairies” (24-26) famously defended the right of fairy tales to be fantastic and non-didactic. And Elizabeth Rigby argued in her 1844 article, “Children’s Books” (19-22), that children are able, intelligent and discriminating in their reading. She does not use the expression “reading rage,” but neither does she seem afraid of this possibility. She and Dickens warn instead of the overly moralistic, religious and didactic tendencies in children’s literature. In practice too, the English development in children’s literature (pub-
lishing, translation, new genres, widening literacy) leads away from the German *elend*-
position (which of course had its proponents in England too). In Sweden, English girl’s
books and boy’s adventure stories are eventually recommended (albeit grudgingly) by
leading voices such as Key and Berg. Concessions are made about the importance of the
imagination. But this change was brought about, not top down – by accepting a theoreti-
cal model of thinking (such as Wolgast’s) – but because of changes on more fundamental
levels of production and distribution of literature.

I will now make an overview of how “English” models of children’s literature made in-
roads into the Swedish juvenile reading market during the 19th C. First, I will look at
Walter Scott and the historical novel. Then I will focus on Lewis Carroll and the literary
fairy tale and nonsense nursery rhymes. This will be followed by a comment on Hesba
Stretton and the moral-realistic tale. Finally, I will say something about the first English-
inspired journal, *Talltrasten*. Already as this (far from complete) list suggests, however, it
is clear that the influx of children’s literature models from the English-speaking world
into Sweden was great and varied during the 19th C. According to polysystem theory the
readiness to accept new genres and forms of writing in a target language is contingent on
the status of the source language, both in the system at large and in relation to the target
language (see Shavit). Low status genres, such as children’s literature, stand very little
chance of being translated unless they originate in high status language areas. Thus the
varied, innovative and manifold translation activity from English to Swedish is a strong
indication of the rise of English in this period. Conversely, the acceptance of new models
of writing feeds back and reinforces the status of the source language further.
One of the earliest “modern” genres associated with children’s literature, the historical novels of Walter Scott, were not considered children’s literature at all to begin with. *Waverley*, *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe*, to mention just a few of Scott’s best known works, were all written with a general reading public in mind. This circumstance also goes some way towards explaining (albeit somewhat paradoxically) why his novels were accepted as fit reading matter for young readers. As we have seen in the background section, many critics were of the opinion that children should not read “children’s literature,” but rather the ancient classics, folk tales and a few modern works of genius. Key and Berg both included Scott on their list, not because he was a children’s writer, but because he was a canonical writer like Goethe and Shakespeare. Moreover, they were instant classics. Scott’s books were international bestsellers, and translated immediately on publication. In Sweden Scott was the subject of adulatory articles by leading intellectuals like Erik Gustaf Geijer and Carl Jonas Love Almquist. Scott’s “invention,” the historical novel – with its combination of romantic ethos and realistic description – was universally imitated. The great Scandinavian historical novelists, Denmark’s B. S. Ingemann (*Valdemar Seir* 1826) and Finland’s Zacharias Topelius’ (*Fältskärns Berättelser*, 1867), are both indebted to Scott. History writing itself seemed to make a Scottish “turn” in this period; Anders Fryxell’s monumental *Berättelser ur svenska historien* [Tales from Swedish History] 1–46 (1823–79) is a case in point. No doubt Scott’s ability to write nation and history as a romantic and yet credible fantasy adventure proved irresistible. After all, the 19th century was a period when the modern nation states were formed. Historical novels provided an
exciting collective memory, and a template for how to imagine belonging and provenance.

However, the immense success of Scott’s mode of writing eventually led to cultural inflation, and his goods lost some of its cultural capital over time. The historical novel was used and abused: satirized as in Falstaff Fakir’s *Enhvar sin egen professor* (1894), or put into the context of ghost stories, as in Henrik Schück’s *Allmänn Litteraturhistoria* [General Literary History] (7 vols, 1919-1926) – to just mention some Swedish examples of this tendency. Eventually, the devolution of the historical novel and of Scott in particular, reconfigures these novels as low status and as children’s literature. In other words, Scott’s novels were quickly translated into Swedish because of their high status and popularity. They were regarded as fit for young people to read because they were *not* children’s literature. The genre “invented” by Scott was emulated by other writers: in the English language sphere by writers such as Fenimore Cooper, Frederick Marryatt and R. M. Ballantyne (all promptly translated into Swedish), as well as by Scandinavian authors (see above). By and by historical adventure stories came to be associated with youth reading. The status of the genre changed. This can be traced by analyzing translations. In the case of *Ivanhoe* (1819) it was translated by Georg Scheutz and published in three volumes 1821-22. During the 19th century there followed five other translations and/or abridgements. But here I will focus on the anonymous 1878 translation, *Richard Lejonhjerta: Berättelse för ungdom efter Walter Scotts roman Ivanhoe* [Richard the Lionheart: A Tale for the Young after Walter Scott’s novel Ivanhoe]. This adaptation for younger readers is remarkable for several reasons. In English, *Ivanhoe* was recycled early
on and in various ways – in 1822 as “a historical drama founded on the celebrated romance of the same name,” in the 1880’s as a “Romantic Opera” by Arthur Sullivan, in 1896 as a 60-page “Penny popular,” and “by the beginning of the 20th century “retold for children.” Leaving the media transpositions aside (opera, drama), the Swedish abridgement predates the first English simplified versions with almost twenty years, and more than so if we take into account versions specifically for children. Thus, the devolutionary tendency in Scott discussed above is manifested earlier in translation than in the original language context. Partly this may have to do with the cachet of the original text; in translation the stamp of the original is already diminished and the words subject to interpretation, whereas in the original, the text to some extent remains inviolable.

The title indicates a shift of focus from Ivanhoe to Richard the Lionheart, perhaps motivated by Ivanhoe’s absence from the main plot in the greater part of the book, but maybe also because the king offers a more romantic and striking central figure to the young reader than Ivanhoe. Moreover, in her study *Walter Scotts Ivanhoe under 150 år* Kerstin Elert has shown how the majestic and noble traits have been magnified and supplemented in some of the Swedish translations, and especially so in the 1878 version. Here, symptomatically, Scott’s verdict on Richard’s “brilliant, but useless character, of a knight of romance” (458) has been deleted. Instead, a whole paragraph outlining the king’s virtues has been added in the Tempelstowe episode to explain why the Templars do not dare oppose him (when in fact the original clearly points to the influence of Essex and his men on the course of events). Finally, Scott’s final pronouncement on that “generous, but rash and romantic monarch” (502) has been omitted in the 1878 translation.
The structure of the book is basically unchanged: Scott’s short chapters have regularly been aggregated in pairs or threes, making a total of 22 chapters instead of 44 in the original, but the order of events is intact. Two chapters (14-15), describing Prince John’s machinations after the Ashby tournament have been deleted entirely, however. Scott’s chapter epigraphs have also been cut, as well as all of the ballads and songs, such as “The Crusader’s Return” (191-192) and Ulrika’s song when Torquilstone castle is burning (340-341). The 1878 version totals 30% fewer words than in the first Swedish translation, which in itself is roughly 20% shorter than the original. Excepting easily recognizable cuts, descriptions have been rationed throughout. Local colour and historical setting may be Scott trademarks, but in translation/adaptation these features have been downplayed. Elert shows how the description of nature in chapter one, the portrayal of Gurth, and of Cedric’s hall are less detailed and colourful than in the original (11-12). Similarly, Latinate and French expressions, language markers of clerics (pax vobiscum) and Norman lords, have been reduced to a minimum.

The text has undergone other changes as well. References to sexuality have been obscured or altered, as when Gurth complains about the Normans: “The finest and the fattest is for their board; the loveliest for their couch” (32). In the 1878 version the second part of the sentence is given as “det präktigaste för deras hus och slott” (8), which means “the finest for their houses and castles” (my translation). The best example is perhaps when Rebecca has been imprisoned in the tower of Torquilstone (247-258). First the old crone, Ulrika, tells Rebecca in no uncertain terms that she is going to be raped, just like
Ulrika had been when the Normans had killed her husband and children; this section has been omitted altogether in the 1878 version. In my opinion there are two reasons for this: the sexual nature of her discourse, but also the tendency to downplay the negative portraits of Saxon characters throughout the text. In the Swedish version, Ulrika is noble rather than deranged, and Athelstane not quite the lumbering blockhead we remember from Scott’s original. My guess is that there are some underlying Germanic sympathies (Swedish-Saxon) at work here. No such sympathies can be traced to the Normans, however, and in the following pages Bois-Guilbert tries to force himself on Rebecca. In the original, the erotic violence is pronounced, whereas in the translation the violence is theological; Rebecca must convert to Christianity (126).

This brings us to the third and final translation issue I want to discuss: anti-Semitism. Unlike some of the other Swedish pre WWII-translations (1917, for example), the anti-Jewish expressions in Ivanhoe have not been exacerbated in the 1878 translation. On the other hand Scott’s explanations of why the Jews were despised are missing or have been abbreviated.

I know not whether the fair Rowena would have been altogether satisfied with the species of emotion with which her devoted knight had hitherto gazed upon the beautiful features, and fair form, and lustrous eyes, of the lovely Rebecca; eyes whose brilliancy was shaded, and, as it were, mellowed, by the fringe of her long silken eyelashes, and which a minstrel would have compared to the evening star darting its rays through a bower of jessamine. But Ivanhoe was too good a Catholic to retain the same class of feeling towards a Jewess. This Rebecca had foreseen, and for this very reason she had hastened to mention her father’s name and lineage; yet – for the fair and wise daughter of Isaac was not without a touch female weakness – she could not but sigh internally when the glance of respectful admiration, not altogether unmixed with tenderness, with which Ivanhoe had hitherto regarded his unknown benefactress, was exchanged at once for a cold, composed, and collected, and fraught with no deeper feeling than that which expressed a grateful sense of courtesy received from an unexpected quarter, and from one of an infe-
rior race It was not that Ivanhoe’s former carriage expressed more than that general devotional homage which youth always pays to beauty; yet it was mortifying that one word should operate a spell to remove poor Rebecca, who could not be supposed altogether ignorant of her title to such homage, into a degraded class, to whom it could not be honourably rendered.

But the gentleness and candour of Rebecca’s nature imputed no fault to Ivanhoe for sharing in the universal prejudices of his age and religion. On the contrary, the fair Jewess, though sensible her patient now regarded her as one of a race of reprobation, with whom it was disgraceful to hold any beyond the most necessary intercourse, ceased not to pay the same patient and devoted attention to his safety and convalescence. (299)

Ehuru Ivanhoe i trossaker var fördragsammare, än de fleste af hans kristne samtida, så delade han dock tillräckligt det bland desse allmänt herrskande föräktet för judarne för att högst oangenämnt beröras af Rebeccas meddelande. Ofrivilligt gjorde han en rörelse af vedervilja, som icke undgick hans sköna vårdarinnan. Men Rebeccas ädla sinne tillräknade icke Ivanhoe, att han delade sin tids och sin religions allmänna fördom. Ehuru den sjuke från detta ögonblick tycktes betrakta henne såsom en person med hvilken han icke utan att vanåra sig kunde hafva annat än det allra nödvändigaste umgänge, så upphörde hon detta oaktadt icke att egna samma tillgifna omsorg åt hans återställande. (145-146)

Although Ivanhoe was more tolerant in questions of faith than most Christians in his day and age, he did share enough of the general contempt for Jews to be unpleasantly affected by Rebecca’s announcement. Involuntarily he made a movement of repugnance, which his beautiful caretaker could not help but notice. But Rebecca’s noble nature did not hold Ivanhoe accountable for partaking in the general prejudice of his age and his religion.

Works Cited


Vad de travesterade verserna angår, har jag där det lät sig göra, begagnat mig av inhemska sådana, vilka varit mina läsare mera bekanta (såsom jag hört att den tyska översättaren gjort) enär de troligen därigenom komma att vinna i intresse. (113)

Vissa verser hoppar hon över, men hon ger däremot en förklarande not till det svåra ordet ”caucus-kapplöpningen”: att det gäller USA:s elektorsmöten, där det vanligen går vilt och stormigt till och att tävlingen mellan de olika partierna kallas caucus-race, vilke kan
liknas vid virrvarr och förbistring. Och här travesterar hon Frithiofs saga i Alices egen mun:

De växte uti flodens våg,
Så vackert förr man aldrig såg!
Den ene liksom krokodilen,
Med stjerten plaskande i Nilen!

Den andra som en pil sköt fram
Och stack ihjäl båd’ får och lam
De begge passa för hvarannan,
Som locket uppå kaffepannan! (Von Zweigbergk 115)

Det finnes ett fält inom den Svenska litteraturen, som hittills förblivit nästan ouppodlat – det är litteraturen för barn och den tidiga ungdomen. Att denna litteratur emellertid ej är någon oviktig gren av det stor träd, hvars blad börja alltmer och mer sprida sig öfver vår jord, skall hvar och en inse, som besinnar af hvilken omätlig betydenhet det första fröet är, som nedlägges i ett barns hjerta --- Detta är ett fält, som i några andra länder, i synnerhet i England, bearbetas med mycken kärlek och förmåga. Visst kunna öfversättningar vara utaf stor nytta, men olika lokala förhållanden och skiljaktiga seder och bruk i olika länder emellan, torde ibland hindra idéerna från att utöfva samma verkan, när de öfverflytts från det ena språket till det andra (115)

1 This section, which comes near the end of the book, has apparently not been translated into English previously. The most complete translation to date of The Century of the Child is the 1909 edition (New York & London).

2 For a more complete Ivanhoe-biography I refer to the Corson collection, Edinburgh University, available at http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/corson.html This database has served as my main source of information on early English editions of Ivanhoe.

3 To compare the number of words between languages can of course be misleading. There are, for instance, more compounds and aggregate words in Swedish than in English. Nevertheless, even the first Swedish version is shorter than the original. But the most interesting and valid point of comparison is still the one between Swedish versions of the same work.