Adult Mediation and the Representation of Violence: A Textual Study of The Greek Mythology Retellings for Young Readers

Xueliang Li

School of HongKong, The Education University of HongKong, Hong Kong 999077, China

Abstract. Ancient Greek mythology serves as a vital heritage within European cultural traditions. This study explores how adult adaptors mediate and reconstruct depictions of violence when reworking classical myths written for adults for child audiences. Through comparative textual analysis of Robert Graves' The Greek Myths and Ingri and Edgar Parin D'Aulaire's D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths, a retelling intended for children, this paper identifies four objective textual strategies used to regulate violent content: omission of gory mutilation details, semantic softening of violent action verbs, restructuring cruel acts at the plot level, and transforming horrifying imagery to achieve a child friendly narrative tone. The results indicate that adult-led textual intervention systematically reduces the salience of violence in the text, thus aligning classical story with the norm in the receiving culture for children's literature. This study unveils the mechanisms of children's myth retelling in adaptation of text, and provides empirical reference points for educators who analyse and choose classic literary works for children.

Keywords: Greek Mythology, Children's Literature, Adult Mediation, Textual Retelling, Violent Representation, Comparative Textual Analysis.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Ancient Greek mythology occupies a foundational position within European cultural literary heritage, representing a corpus of narratives continuously reinterpreted across centuries [1]. The stories are broadly used as the fundamental material to build cultural literacy for children's cross-cultural education. Young learners are introduced to basic cultural archetypes, historical motifs and complex human dilemmas in these ancient stories. However, unadapted collections of myths, such as Robert Graves' The Greek Myths, are written for adults. They have lots of explicit scenes of physical violence, cannibalism, dismemberment, cruel killings and so much more. When texts originally composed for adults are adapted or retold for child audiences, structural tension emerges between the unflinching brutality of source myths and normative expectations for children's literature within educational contexts [2].

1.2 Research Purpose and Questions

Adapting classical myths for children requires adult creators to act as textual mediators, modifying source texts to conform to standards of the receiving culture regarding what is appropriate for young readers. While educators value mythology for its cultural and literary significance, the presence of explicit violence presents a practical dilemma in selecting and utilizing these texts for instructional purposes. Although recent years have seen an increased interest in research in children's literature adaptation, empirical textual research analyzing the precise mechanisms by which violent descriptions are adjusted in mythic retellings remains sparse.

To address this gap, this study conducts a qualitative textual comparison between Robert Graves's The Greek Myths and Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire's D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths. The primary objective is to document and categorize the specific textual modifications made when transforming an adult mythological source into a classic children's text [2, 3].

This study addresses two core research questions:

(1) What specific textual strategies are employed in D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths to mediate and reframe the explicit descriptions of violence present in Graves's original text?

(2) How do these textual modifications systematically alter the representation of violent facts across lexical, structural, and tonal levels?

2. Literature Review

It has been recognized in children's literature translation and retelling research that children's text is not a neutral reproduction of the source text. Adults, however, mold content to the social and textual norms. Translation studies scholarship in key aspects adult textual intervention and the treatment of violence are examined. This theoretical approach does not include arguments from education, which will be dealt with separately in the discussion section.

Nodelman theorizes the "Hidden Adult" to get insight into the working of adult power within text production [4]. He points out that every text written or adapted for children carries adult perspectives. Adult voices behind a story are not necessarily seen by young readers, although adult decision making controls what readers encounter and thus, the authority of retellers, editors and translators. On a social level, Shavit places this practice of the adult in the framework of polysystem theory [5]. She claims that children's retellings work in a context of constraints from the target society. The boundaries of adaptation texts for children are set by the moral standards and widely-shared expectations of children's texts, do not allow retellers to make arbitrary choices.

From the level of society to the level of the individual practitioner, Oittinen discusses the reteller's attitude [6]. She notes that adapters hold an internal "child image," a mental picture of intended young readers that guides practical textual adjustments. Retellers decide what information and language is appropriate and suitable for their envisaged audience and adapt the source accordingly, including the portrayal of cruelty and violence. At the textual level, Stephens observes that linguistic and narrative choices within children's fiction are seldom neutral, as revisions to plot and word selection embed implicit adult judgments [7]. To conclude, these scholars account for the process and the rationale behind adult created textual change without necessarily focusing on violent text analysis.

This study uses the definition of a violent text as writing that is related to injurious physical force, and distinguishes between violence in the real world and as it is portrayed in literature [8]. Nimon notes textual violence is not limited to visible bodily harm [9]. It also features menacing threats, cruel arrangement of the narrative and frightening atmospheres effects. In the source texts of Greek myth, this kind of violence is manifested as mutilation of the body, gory details, violent verbs and frightening scenes [10]. These salient textual features frequently trigger adaptative changes made to stories for children by adult mediators.

Addressing this specific gap in research on violent rewriting in children's literature, Todorova proposes the concept of adult mediation [11]. This term refers to the phenomenon that adult agents including translators, editors and illustrators intervene in originally child authored texts during translation and publication. In this process, adults implant their own perspectives and judgements, which reshape the original meaning and voice of children’s works. Although her research focuses on a child written war diary in cross lingual translation contexts, her core finding regarding adult content gate keeping for young audiences applies beyond translated works. Building on this research foundation, Todorova further summarizes practical rules of violent content processing in English translations of Balkan children’s literature [12]. She states that adult mediators commonly remove cruel descriptions and weaken violent word choices, while intensified violent depictions can also be observed in individual cases. Todorova objectively records these textual and paratextual rewriting phenomena and does not assess their psychological or educational influences on young readers [12]. Following her observational perspective of adult mediation, this study shifts the research context from cross lingual translation to intralingual English retelling of Greek myths. It explores whether similar content regulation strategies appear when adult oriented source texts are adapted for child readers.

Scholarly discussions of children’s adaptation and retelling have developed extensively over decades [13, 14]. Much existing research within children’s literature translation studies concentrates on cross-lingual translation practices [15]. Meanwhile, scholarship from cultural studies interrogates

the ideological reshaping of traditional stories for young audiences [16]. Nevertheless, comparatively little empirical textual work specifically examines how violent mythological content is mediated within intralingual English retellings of classical Greek sources.

While these scholars establish key theoretical ground for understanding adult textual intervention, few studies apply these combined perspectives to retellings of Greek myths. This study therefore applies these theoretical insights to identify concrete textual strategies and multi-level shifts in violent representation within a widely used children's myth text.

3. Methodology

3.1 Corpus Selection

This study draws on two English language texts. The source text is The Greek Myths compiled by Robert Graves, an adult focused collection that preserves full accounts of cruel and violent myth episodes [2]. The retelling being compared is the popular D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths by Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire [3].

Analysis is limited to myth episodes that are found in both texts. This rule eliminates episodes that are completely omitted in the D'Aulaire version and ensures valid point-to-point textual comparison. This study concentrates only on the verbal content in the printed books. There is no systematic study of visual illustrations.

3.2 Analytical Procedure

This paper uses qualitative comparative textual analysis approach. Based on the observation of previous research the study makes comparison of the source and retelling segments in lexical, structural and tonal aspects. It tracks and classifies all measurable changes in violent content, including removal of graphic detail, shifts in word choice, plot rearrangement and changes in narrative tone. There is no subjective psychological or educational conclusion that is drawn directly from textual evidence.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Omission of Graphic Brutality

One observable strategy in D'Aulaires' retelling is the direct removal of graphic bodily detail that appears in Graves's source text. This practice cuts explicit descriptions of physical harm while keeping the main plot outline intact [2, 3].

The story of the overthrow of Uranus by Cronus is the only one in which Graves retains pictures of castration and of physical mutilation, as well as pictures of blood flowing from the wound and of the supernatural figures that seem to arise from the blood. He still has all the bodily scars from the assault. In contrast to this, D'Aulaires' retelling follows the basic story line:creates a flint sickle, Cronus takes the weapon and confronts his father. However, all the references to mutilation of the body, physical harm and blood creation of supernatural beings have vanished from the children's adaptation. The concrete violent act is reduced to the vague statement that Cronus fell upon his father. Only Uranus' flight and loss of power remain. This sanitization is a common aspect in the adaptation of a myth in the juvenile field. The political theme of God's usurpation of power remains intact, and violence done to the body is systematically erased [2, 3].

4.2 Lexical Softening of Violent Action Verbs

Graves uses forceful, morally-laden verbs derived from Hesiod's Theogony to describe Cronus' infanticidal behavior: swallowed, vomited up. Such verbs emphasize the monstrousness of Cronus' paranoid act, as an act of violent consumption and tyrannical fear of usurpation. Lexical softening is done in the juvenile adaptation of D'Aulaires, which keeps the basic plot, but the rest of the story's

characters and elements are slightly different: Cronus is afraid of the prophecy, he eats his children as they are born, Rhea replaces them with a stone, and Cronus is made sick with an emetic that returns the children to him. It adds to the neutral framing verb took ("he took the newborn god and swallowed it"), which makes the visceral brutality of "devouring" less intense. The description also concentrates on the magical, safe conclusion ("safe and sound") and defuses the horror of infanticide, the children being not so much torn up and swallowed as securely placed "securely inside him" no suggestion of tearing, eating, bodily harm or mortal peril. Though the factual sequence of myth events remains intact, high-impact violent connotations associated with devour are filtered out through milder verb choices and reassuring descriptive phrasing, making the narrative suitable for a child audience [2, 3].

4.3 Structural Mitigation of Cruel Acts At Plot Level

The story of Prometheus' multiple and recurring tortures takes up no little plot space in Graves. He does not forget graphic details: Prometheus is chained naked, exposed to the bitter nightly frost, and suffered perpetual torment as a greedy vulture gnaws at his liver each day, and it grows back each night to start all the pain over again year in, year out. The extended description focuses on the seemingly unending repetition of physical pain, before Heracles shows up as the deus ex machina hero from afar. D'Aulaires do structural mitigation at plot level, however. The process of tormenting is compressed into two brief statements. The visceral details are omitted; naked captivity, nightly freezing exposure and the emphatic time marker of years long suffering. The emphasis is quickly removed from physical suffering to Prometheus' moral integrity ("did not repent of what he had done for mankind") and the narrative leaps to the moment of heroic salvation in Heracles' rescue. While the basic myth elements (chaining, eagle eating liver, nightly regeneration, final liberation) are preserved, the juvenile adaptation reduces the amount of screentime devoted to the cruelties and makes the episode the parable of moral courage rather than merely a description of endless bodily torture [2, 3].

4.4 Tonal Shift of Frightening Imagery

Graves' imagery is dark and nightmarish, and in this chapter he uses it to describe Typhon as a primal threat, an apocalyptic figure. He describes the monster's corporeal features in disgusting detail: the monster's lower body is made of coiled serpents, his hands are many serpent-heads, fire blazes from his eyes, flaming rocks are thrown from his mouth and finally, in a gruesome scene, Typhon cuts the sinews from Zeus' limbs and imprisons him. The menace of an oppressive tone, as from archaic myth is reinforced by words like fled in terror. The D'Aulaires by contrast, do a tonal shift of terrifying imagery. Typhon remains a hundred-headed, fire-breathing adversary, but it is a fairy tale story for young readers. The whole song of the mutilation and imprisonment of Zeus, and the grotesque body horror are completely cut. All that is left is a simple adventure narrative: The monsters attack Olympus, the gods take flight, the hero-god Zeus fights a grand battle and emerging victorious, vanquishes the enemy. Even the ever-present menace ("Typhon is still raging underneath") is reframed as a folksy explanation for volcanic activity as opposed to existential cosmic horror. The terrifying primal-demon motif is softened into a colourful, adventurous monster-fight suitable for children [2, 3].

4.5 Summary

In each of the four dimensions listed above, there are several types of textual modification that can be found in D'Aulaires' retelling. This study organizes these revisions around four analytical dimensions of textual violence established in prior scholarship: omission of graphic bodily brutality, lexical softening of violentaction verbs, structural mitigation of cruel plot sequences, and shifts in frightening narrative tone [8, 9]. Some of these changes involve the elimination of graphic material, others by word choice, plot compression or tonal reshaping. Reducing text for violence is not the only reason for shortening text in the children's version; general text reduction occurs to make it more readable as well. However, numerous revisions specifically act upon depictions of cruelty and

physical harm. These observed textual patterns answer the two core research questions set out in the introduction.

5. Discussion

5.1 Textual Intervention And Violent Representation in Retelling Practice

The first lesson in this unit concerns how the text is intervened by using the strategies of retelling and how violence is represented in the text. This section tries to explain the findings of the text in the light of the theory presented in previous literature. Together the four adaptive strategies uncovered in the analysis provide a picture of the systematic ways in which adult retellers adapt the violence in stories for young audiences. These observable textual adjustments align with Todorova's empirical summaries of adult intervention, in which adult gatekeepers filter, soften and restructure cruel depictions within children's texts [12].

Furthermore, these rewriting practices reflect the broader mechanisms of adult textual power outlined in children's literature studies. Consistent with Nodelman's concept of the hidden adult, all modifications are guided by invisible adult judgement regarding suitable content for child readers [4]. The limited use of violence also reflects the normative social restrictions noted by Shavit and the overall narrative style, which is softened, is in line with the reteller's internal child image as proposed by Oittinen [5, 6]. As Stephens argues that these lexical and structural revisions are not neutral simplifications but value laden textual rearrangements that reshape how cruelty is narrated and perceived [7].

Notably, while Todorova's original formulation of adult mediation arises from cross-lingual translation of child-authored narratives, the regulative mechanisms identified in this study suggest that adult mediation operates analogously within intralingual retelling [11]. The regular features of violence mitigation in this myth adaptation corpus illustrate that adult textual intervention is a transferable phenomenon that goes beyond war themed translated literature.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications for Children'S Myth Reading

This study only concentrates on the aspects of adaptation mechanisms in texts while the results of this study are objective reference for educational practice. When adapting literary texts, teachers should be critical in their selection of texts and their use of them, as suggested by Short [17].

The visible discrepancy between adult original myths and children's retold versions indicates that juvenile reading materials are pre mediated cultural products. Educational practitioners should recognise that children's mythic narratives have already undergone deliberate filtering and tonal adjustment. Within the classroom, an awareness of reshaping of these texts enables teachers to review adapted texts more rationally and help students to perceive how classic stories are reshaped to young readers.

5.3 Research Limitations

There are some limitations in this study. First, the analysis does not include any omitted storylines or visual illustrations: it is limited to the shared myth episodes in two versions of the text in English. Second, while this study draws on Todorova's notion of adult mediation, her original analysis encompasses both textual adjustments and paratextual interventions such as illustrations, prefaces and editorial notes [11]. By contrast, this comparative study does not focus on the paratextual elements and the visual materials. Thus the term "adult mediation" in this paper is limited to modifications of the written text, specifically in the language and narrative of the core text. The study could be continued in the future by exploring the paratextual and visual aspects of the myth retellings for young age groups.

This research has only textual comparison without reader reception data and classroom empirical data. Future studies would involve analyzing other myth retellings and or other multilingual translated

versions for comparison. Future study could draw on social critical frameworks or psychoanalytic perspectives to gain further insights [16, 18, 19].

6. Conclusion

This study examines how adult retellers mediate violent content when transforming adult oriented Greek myth narratives into children's reading materials. Through a comparative textual analysis of Robert Graves's original collection and D'Aulaires' popular retelling, the research identifies four consistent textual strategies used to regulate violent representation, including the omission of graphic brutality, lexical softening of violent verbs, structural compression of cruel episodes, and tonal adjustment of frightening imagery.

These textual modifications reflect broader practices of adult intervention documented in children's literature research. The observed rewriting patterns align with existing theoretical accounts of adult textual authority, social normative constraints and reader oriented adaptation judgements.

This study further suggests that the descriptive patterns of adult-mediated violent content adjustment documented by Todorova in translated war-related texts find an analogue in intralingual classical myth retellings, where adult adaptors perform comparable regulative textual work for child audiences.

As a supplementary practical reference, the textual differences revealed in this research enable educators to better recognise the mediated nature of children's classical literature. Teachers may develop more critical awareness when selecting and interpreting adapted myth texts for young learners. Future research could expand the corpus and explore cross version or cross linguistic adaptation of violent myth content.

References

[1] Johnston, S. I. (2023). Gods and mortals: Ancient Greek myths for modern readers. Princeton University Press.

[2] Graves, R. (1955). The Greek myths. Penguin Books.

[3] D'Aulaire, I., & D'Aulaire, E. P. (1962). D'Aulaires' book of Greek myths. Doubleday.

[4] Nodelman, P. (2008). The hidden adult: Defining children's literature. Johns Hopkins University Press.

[5] Shavit, Z. (1986). Poetics of children's literature. University of Georgia Press.

[6] Oittinen, R. (2000). Translating for children. Garland Publishing.

[7] Stephens, J. (1992). Language and ideology in children's fiction. Longman.

[8] Reimer, M. (1997). Introduction: Violence and violent children's texts. Children's Literature Association Quarterly, 22(3), 102–104.

[9] Nimon, M. (1993). Violence in children's literature today. In Selected papers from the Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship (Adelaide, Australia), 29–31.

[10] Tatar, M. (1992). Off with their heads!: Fairy tales and the culture of childhood. Princeton University Press.

[11] Todorova, M. (2017). Children's voices from war zones: Muted by adult mediation. Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature, 55(2), 20–27.

[12] Todorova, M. (2022). The translation of violence in children's literature: Images from the Western Balkans. Routledge.

[13] Hunt, P. (2005). Understanding children's literature. Routledge.

[14] Nikolajeva, M. (2005). Aesthetic approaches to children's literature: An introduction. Scarecrow Press.

[15] Van Coillie, J., & Verschueren, W. P. (Eds.). (2006). Children's literature in translation: Challenges and strategies. St. Jerome Publishing.

[16] Zipes, J. (2002). Sticks and stones: The troublesome success of children's literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter. Routledge.

[17] Short, K. G. (2009). Critically reading the word and the world: Building intercultural understanding through literature. Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature, 47(2), 1–10.

[18] Pinsent, P. (1997). Children's literature and the politics of equality. David Fulton Publishers.

[19] Coats, K. (2004). Looking glasses and neverlands: Lacan, desire, and subjectivity in children's literature. University of Iowa Press.