

## María Elena Walsh and Lewis Carroll: Transatlantic Resonances of Fantasy and Folklore in Children's Literature

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, which celebrates the higher sense of nonsense and introduces readers to a Wonderland full of vivid and irrational characters, transformed the genre of children's literature in the English-speaking world. Although Carroll achieved international fame for his writing, María Elena Walsh (1930–2011), the first Argentine author to write in the nonsense genre for children, is famous in her own country but little known elsewhere. The purpose of this project is to determine whether this internationally obscure Argentinean writer was influenced by Lewis Carroll, and, if so, to establish how Walsh re-interpreted his ideas in a different historical context. Regardless, I will examine whether María Elena Walsh played the same role in Argentina that Carroll played in England by departing from the didactic, condescending prose for children of earlier generations and speaking to children in terms they understand and enjoy, e.g. nonsense, wordplay, and kinetics.

To complete this project, I propose traveling to the International Youth Library in Munich and spending two weeks reviewing Walsh's works as well as the copious material about Walsh's life, influences, style, and connections to Lewis Carroll in their documentation library. The culmination of my studies will be an article written about María Elena Walsh which, with my faculty's advisor's help, I hope to publish in an international journal of children's literature, as well as a complete bibliography of English and Spanish sources relating to Walsh which can be used by future researchers pursuing the same course of study. I will also present an exhibit in the Northwestern Library at the end of the academic year on María Elena Walsh, and will incorporate the material into an honors thesis in International Studies.

A Eurocentric conceptualization of the term "international" has caused many scholars of comparative children's literature to focus on texts produced solely in (Western) Europe and the English-speaking world. Emer O'Sullivan emphasizes that "The international book trade is dominated by the north-west European and North American region" which has greatly contributed to the fact that "...there is no equal exchange of texts between all countries; rather, the border crossing process is extremely imbalanced."<sup>1</sup> Argentina is situated outside of these common routes of textual exchange. O'Sullivan's observations help to explain why María Elena Walsh, although immensely popular in Argentina, is virtually unknown outside of her home country and especially in the United States. I began my research on Walsh by exploring the resources available within the Northwestern University Library system. Although Walsh published over forty books exclusively for children, only three were available when I started this project, and *Dailan Kifki*, arguably her most important work, was not among them. With my faculty advisor, who is on the staff of Northwestern's library, I have helped correct this deficit, but the point remains: Even in a first-class research library, the most outstanding children's writers outside of the Anglo-European mainstream are grossly underrepresented.

I strongly suspect that María Elena Walsh was influenced by Lewis Carroll and that she re-interpreted his ideas within her cultural context. Both Carroll and Walsh utilize strong-willed and rational female protagonists—and both were one of the first to do so in their respective countries. *Alice in Wonderland*, written on dual levels, is simultaneously one girl's exploration of a nonsense world and an author's highly-charged societal critique and political commentary. Walsh's *Dailan Kifki* takes place in the plane of reality, yet the female narrator encounters a stream of fantastical obstacles, ranging from a flying elephant to an incompetent Secretary of Aeronautics who has little to no idea of how to run his department. Both *Dailan Kifki* and

Desventuras en el país-jardín-de-infantes (“Misadventures in the Kindergarten Country”) are acerbic critiques of the Argentine military dictatorship woven into the form of an entertaining and nonsensical book for children. Where Carroll has caterpillars speak in riddles, so does Walsh have firefighters compose limericks. Both authors employed nonsense as a tool to critique their worlds and to challenge authority. As William Blackburn noted, “. . .nonsense is the art of rearranging immutable laws in such a way as to set logic, order, authority, or accepted standards of behavior slightly awry.”<sup>2</sup> Their use of nonsense enabled the child readers of Walsh and Carroll to perceive reality in such a way that encouraged creativity and questioned structures of authority. This world view is a tremendous departure from the pre-Walsh and pre-Carroll children’s books in Argentina and England respectively, which emphasized rigidity, didacticism, and unquestioning obedience.

Thus I believe that an in-depth analysis of Walsh’s works, and their relationship to Alice in Wonderland, is highly necessary. Was Walsh influenced by Carroll’s work, and if so, to what extent? Did Walsh ever explicitly acknowledge her works’ similarities to Carroll’s? To prepare for this research visit, I have already corresponded via email with the librarians at the IYL, all of whom have extensive backgrounds in children’s literature research, and a collection of sources on Walsh has already been assembled for me. I will focus on autobiographical material published by Walsh, in which she may draw connections between herself and Carroll, and especially her column from the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*, which will provide me with Walsh’s insights into her own work.

I plan to leave for Munich on March 12<sup>th</sup> and return on the 25<sup>th</sup>. These dates coincide with finals week and spring break, such that I will be able to complete my research unimpeded by coursework. I have established contact with Petra Woersching, who, as Director’s Assistant at the IYL, works with international students who travel to Munich to complete research projects. Ms. Woersching has arranged for my accommodation, as recorded in Appendix A.

As a research assistant for Professor Jeffrey Garrett, Director of Special Collections and Archives at the Northwestern Library, I have spent the academic year assembling a preliminary bibliography of María Elena Walsh’s work. I have devoted time to reading and evaluating Walsh’s work, and out of this research I developed my questions regarding the role of Walsh’s work in Argentina, as well as inquiries about the similarities between her work and Lewis Carroll’s. My coursework as an International Studies and Anthropology major has prepared me for this research, as have the classes I have taken in Spanish, which enable me to read sources in that language. As questions arise, I will turn to my faculty advisor, Professor Garrett, and to the librarians at the International Youth Library for guidance.

My research on María Elena Walsh and the international world of children’s literature speaks deeply to my academic interests. This research lies at the nexus of a larger project, one which includes my position as a student research assistant, the books I suggested that Northwestern acquire, and the exhibit I will present in the library at the end of the academic year on Walsh. In spring quarter I will enroll in an Independent Study seminar, during which time I will continue to pursue my research on Walsh and develop ideas for the honors thesis in International Studies that I plan to write about Walsh. In addition, the article and accompanying bibliography that I aim to publish in an international journal of children’s literature will hopefully spark interest in and encourage further research on Walsh. Ultimately, I hope that Walsh’s work will be re-illustrated, translated into English, and published in the United States, and that her invaluable contributions to children’s literature be recognized by experts and publishers—and enjoyed by children—everywhere.

<sup>1</sup>Emer O'Sullivan, *Comparative Children's Literature* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 65.

<sup>2</sup>Blackburn, W. (1980). *Lifting the Curse of the Roman: Quintus Horatius Flaccus Meets the Pied Piper of Hamelin*: **23**.

## Appendix B: Selected Bibliography

- Diocares, M. A. (1999). *María Elena Walsh : el canto del tiempo nuevo*.
- Dujovne Ortiz, A. (1982). María Elena Walsh. Madrid; Gijón, Ediciones Júcar.
- Facio, S. and M. E. Walsh (1999). María Elena Walsh : retrato(s) de una artista libre. Buenos Aires, Argentina, LA, La Azotea, Editorial Fotográfica.
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Sibbald, K. M. (1997). María Elena Walsh Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature V. Smith. Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers 1561-1565.

Spencer, M. M. (2001). Children's literature and national identity. Stoke on Trent, Trentham Books.

Viater, N. (10/01/2011) María Elena Walsh: adiós a la mujer que nos enseñó a ser chicos y nos hizo crecer. Clarín

Walsh, M. E. (1999). Diario brujo : 1995-1999. Buenos Aires, Espasa Calpe. [Walsh's Personal Diary]

## **Appendix C: Selected Bibliography of Works by María Elena Walsh**

### Children's Literature

La mona Jacinta [Jacinta the Monkey]. Buenos Aires, 1960.

Tutú Maramba. Buenos Aires, 1960.

El reino del Revés [The Upside-Down Kingdom]. Buenos Aires: Fariña Editores, 1965.

Zoo Loco [Crazy Zoo]. Buenos Aires: Fariña Editores, 1966.

Cuentopos de Gulubú [Tales of Gulubú]. Buenos Aires: Fariña Editores, 1966.

Dailan Kifki. Buenos Aires: Fariña Editores, 1966.

El diablo inglés [The English Devil]. Buenos Aires: Editorial Estrada, 1970.

La sirena y el capitán [The Mermaid and the Captain]. Buenos Aires: Editorial Estrada, 1974.

El país de la geometría [The Geometry Country]. Buenos Aires: Editorial Estrada, 1974.

Chaucha y palito [Little to Nothing]. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1977.

Bisa vuela [Bisa Flies]. Buenos Aires: Hyspamérica, 1985.

La nube traicionera [The Treacherous Cloud]. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1989.

Manuelita ¿Dónde vas? [Manuelita, Where are you Going?]. Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe, 1997.

Manuelita la Tortuga [Manuelita the Tortoise] Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe, 1998.

Hotel Pioho's Palace. Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2002.

### Works for Adults

Otoño imperdonable [Unforgivable Autumn]. Buenos Aires, 1947.

Apenas viaje [As Soon as I Travel]. Buenos Aires, 1948.

Casi milagro [Almost a Miracle]. Montevideo, 1958.

Hecho a Mano [Hand Made]. Buenos Aires: L. Fariñas, 1965.

Fantasmas en el parque [Ghosts in the Park]. Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2008.

Albums of songs for Children (Selected)

Canciones para mí [Songs for Me], 1963

Canciones para mirar [Songs to Look At], 1963

Juguemos en el mundo [Let's Play in the World], 1968

El sol no tiene bolsillos [The Sun doesn't have Pockets], 1971

Como la cigarra [Like the Cicada], 1972

De puño y letra [Handwritten] 1976