Censorship in the English translations of Giambattista Basile’s fairy tale collection *Lo Cunto de li Cunti*, with examples from the translators’ prefaces and from the fairy tale “The old woman who was skinned”

**Student ID: 4190874**

**Introduction**

This essay will open by providing a brief introduction to Giambattista Basile’s *Cunto de li Cunti*, setting it within the wider context in which it was written.

The first part will trace the history of its translation into English, with the aim of identifying those instances of censorship that emerge from the study of the translators’ prefaces.

The second part will be devoted to a more detailed analysis of a few examples of attenuation or omission in the fairy tale entitled “The old woman who was skinned”.

A conclusion will wrap up this essay’s findings.

The Appendices contain the following translations into English of “The old woman who was skinned”, from the following editions¹: Taylor (1848) and (1912), Burton (1893) and (1927), Penzer (1932), Croce (2006) and Canepa (2007).

The CD-ROM includes digitalised versions of the appendices, along with an audio file of “The old woman who was skinned”, read in the original Neapolitan accent by Maria Luisa Santella, a well known character actress from Naples. Before reading further, I recommend playing this file to have an idea of the fascinating sounds and rhythm of early 17th century Neapolitan.

---

¹ All of the older English editions were consulted from antique copies. The feeling of running through old (and dusty) books, that would sometimes bear the names of their previous owners, is very difficult to describe. Such was the case, for example, of the rare 1932 copy by Penzer, that has the following on the first page, written with a fountain pen: Irina Phatonoff from Cristopher Dow, and then further down, Wragge Morley (31.01.39). Were they father and child? Lovers? Another fascinating baroque-style “story in the story” that digitalised versions will mostly likely never be able to tell.
1. The *Cunto de li Cunti*

Written in the 17th century Neapolitan language, Giambattista Basile’s *Lo Cunto de li Cunti* is a collection of fairy tales that was first translated into modern Italian by the philosopher Benedetto Croce, according to whom “in the *Cunto de li Cunti* or Pentameron of Basile, Italy possessed the oldest, richest and most artistic of all books of popular tales” (Basile, Penzer, Croce 1932: xvi).

Such enthusiasm for Basile’s work was shared also by Jacob Grimm, one of the two famous Grimm brothers, who considered this “collection of fifty tales as the basis of many others, [...] for long time the best and richest that had been found by any nation”, and recognised Basile’s “special talent for collecting them, [along with his] intimate knowledge of the dialect [that enabled him to narrate the stories] with hardly any break, perfectly capturing their tone” (Jacob Grimm cited in Basile, Penzer, Croce 1932: lxix).

According to Nancy Canepa (1999: 11), a well-known scholar and translator of *The Cunto de li Cunti*, “[this] is the first integral collection of literary fairy tales to appear in Western Europe, containing some of the best known fairy tale types (Sleeping beauty, Cinderella, and countless others) in their earliest literary versions”.

This brings us to the origins of *Lo Cunto de li Cunti*. Where did it come from? Where was it heading towards? Was it just a collection of fairy tales, or something more?

Although we can certainly consider Basile’s work as being deeply rooted in traditional folk tales, it soon evolved into something different, paving the way for an entirely new genre: “*Lo Cunto de li Cunti* marks the passage from the fairy tale (or folktale, as the non-literary forms of this genre will subsequently be referred to) as an oral, popular genre to the artful and sophisticated *authored* fairy tale: Basile reinvents the fairy tale in literary form” (Canepa 1999: 11).

In a way we can easily imagine the *Cunto de li Cunti* as being at the crossroads of traditional and literary fairy tales, of the culture of the streets and of the courts, of the past and the future (Basile and Croce, 2006: 19).
Part I

2. Censorship

2.1 Children’s or adult’s literature?

As we will see further on in this essay, censorship beset many translations of the *Cunto de li Cunti*, which was often deemed too vulgar for “the moral sense of the [Victorian] age, happily too refined and elevated [sic] to tolerate indelicacy” (Basile and Taylor, 1848: xiv). Thus, it was not at all uncommon for translators and editors to tone down the parts of the text that they felt would disturb their younger readers.

However, as Canepa points out, despite the subtitle *Entertainment for the Little Ones*, Basile’s collection should not be perceived as children’s literature, which was actually born much later, in the mid-eighteenth century, with Mme de Beaumont’s *Beauty and the Beast*, “often considered one of the texts that initiated the trend of writing fairy tales for the purpose of guiding children and young adults in their social and moral education” (1999: 14). An opinion shared also by the German translator Felix Liebrecht, according to whom “Basile did not write his *Cunto de li Cunti* for children, despite its sub-title: *Entertainment for the little ones*” (Liebrecht cited in Basile, Penzer, Croce 1932: lxx).

Of course this does not imply that Basile’s tales were not also read by children or to children, “but only that [they] were not their exclusive, or even principal, audience” (Canepa, 1999: 14).

2.2 Taylor’s Translation (first edition)

Before looking at some specific examples of censorship in the tale “The old woman who was skinned”, we should take note of those much more unfortunate instances in which entire parts of the *Cunto de li Cunti* were literally crossed-out from a translation.

Such was the case of the first English translation of 1848, which was missing twenty tales.
In the preface, John Edward Taylor wrote that he only translated thirty out of fifty stories, since he believed that “the gross licence in which Basile allowed his humour to indulge [was] wholly inadmissible at [his day] in a work intended for the general reader” (1848: xiv) [such that he] “omitted all those stories considered objectionable, and carefully removed all matter of offence” (1848: xv).

Needless to say, among the tales that were completely censored there are some truly beautiful ones, among which there is also the one that will be examined in the second part of our essay.

2.3 Taylor’s Translation (second edition)

In the following years censorship got even worse, to the point that only twelve tales survived in the second edition of Taylor’s translation, published in 1912.

In her introduction, the editor, Helen Zimmern, acknowledges the great value of Basile’s Cunto de li Cunti, that was “since its appearance, the veritable storehouse, the inexhaustible mine from which all other authors of fairy tales have drawn their series, notably the Frenchman, Charles Perrault, as well as Madame D’Aulnoy” (1912: vi).

She continues, however, in a rather less praising tone, disapproving of Basile’s “gross licentious language [and] impropriety intermingled with but too many of the tales” which “rendered [them] unfit for youthful readers […] notwithstanding that Basile has placed as a second title on his frontispiece the words, Amusement for the Little Ones” (1912: vii). The final verdict, in the absence of both judge and jury, is that “Mr. Taylor’s volume as it stands is unadapted for young readers of the present day, and I have therefore been obliged to revise many pages, omitting offensive words and expressions and adapting the stories to the juvenile ears” (1912: ix).

Summing-up, back in 1848 Mr. Taylor, the Translator, felt himself obliged to leave out twenty tales and in 1912, when the second edition was published, Mrs. Helen Zimmern, the Editor, felt herself obliged to discard another eighteen, which she judged unfit for the “juvenile ears” of her days.

2.4 Fairy tales as ideal candidates for censorship
As a partial excuse we should note, as Asliman does, that all non-literary fairy tales are by their very nature prone to being censored, since they are not meant to be communicated in written form (2009: 1). In fact, “Most scholars will say that no true folktale is fit for print”, since “the act of reducing any oral performance to written language, by the very nature of things is likely to introduce a set of changes” (2009: 1). This is particularly true for those “words or acts that, according to longstanding convention, are unprintable [such as] indecent or even tabooed language, gestures, and events” (2009: 1).

Nor was censorship (and self-censorship) exclusive only to the Cunto de li Cunti. It plagued most other fairy tales published in the Victorian period, as can be seen in the following examples (Asliman 2009: 1):

“In this new edition we have carefully removed every expression inappropriate for children.” Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, preface to the 1819 edition of their Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children's and Household Tales).

“And now, before the translator takes leave of his readers for the second time, he will follow the lead of the good godmother in one of these tales, and forbid all good children to read the two which stand last in the book ["Tom Trotthouse" and "Little Annie the Goose-Girl"]).” George Webbe Dasent, preface to the second edition (1859) of his translation of Popular Tales from the Norse by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe (Edinburgh: David Douglass, 1888), p. vi.

“The Swineherd has certain traits in common with an old Danish folktaile, but the version I heard, as a child, would be quite unprintable.” Hans Christian Andersen, "Notes for Fairy Tales and Stories" (1874), The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983), p. 1073).

“I have had to omit a certain number of stories as unsuited for publication.” Cecil Henry Bompas, preface to Folklore of the Santal Parganas (London: David Nutt, 1909), p. 7.

“A few (four or five) of the stories are frankly indecent, and are always expurgated from popular editions of the work in Italy, a course which I have followed here. Two or three of the present collection are also a trifle free, but I have decided to leave them in their place, with a few unimportant excisions and alterations.” Edward Storer's introduction to his translation of Il Novellino: The Hundred Old Tales (London and New York: George Routledge and Sons and E. P. Dutton and Co., ca. 1925), pp. 31-32.2

As a matter of fact, censorship was so widespread that it did not even spare the “scholars of folklore, whose very science depends upon the unaltered recording of data” and yet

---

2 It is worthwhile noting that the prefaces we have examined so far contain many words with privative prefixes, which are certainly indicative of the strong prohibitionist trend of the period: (im)propriety, (un)fit, (in)admissible, (un)adapted, (in)appropriate, (un)printable, (un)suited, (in)decent.
were “sometimes reluctant to give the whole story, or -- in some instances -- any of the story” (Asliman, 2009: 1). Such was the case, for example, of the authors of the famous Aarne-Thompson fairytale classification system, who would hide “the details [of] the many erotic tales that they encountered” (Asliman, 2009: 1).

2.5 Burton’s Translation (first edition)

Most certainly, if such a trend had continued, the Cunto de li Cunti would have been relegated to the highest shelves of some secluded library and doomed to oblivion.

Fortunately, however, it did not. In 1893, the widow of Richard Burton, the well-known translator of the Arabian Nights, publishes her husband’s complete English translation of the Cunto de li Cunti. On the very first page the editors printed the following note in which they pledge that their edition “represents a faithful and unexpurgated rendering of these Neapolitan Tales”:

Publishers’ Note: In issuing “Il Pentameron” to the subscribers, the Publishers desire to say that the manuscript was placed in their possession by Lady Burton in pursuance of agreement. In no respect has the text been abbreviated; it represents a faithful and unexpurgated rendering of these Neapolitan Tales. The reading of the proofs has fallen to the Publishers; and if there be aught amiss in the work, it should be attributed to the reverential spirit in which they have attempted to fulfil the duty committed to their care (Basile and Burton, 1893: 1).

This rather unusual note seems to confirm what we gathered from Taylor’s and Zimmern’s prefaces: Basile’s tales were generally viewed as unfit for the general public of the time. To the point that Lady Burton felt the need to ask her editors to print a clause specifying that her husband’s work would not be altered or abridged in any way.

We can almost imagine our heroine talking with the editors, insisting that: “They all have to be published! All of them or none!” Something for which we must indeed, be very grateful.

2.6 Burton’s Translation (second edition)

Yet censorship can take many subtle forms and what is uncensored in one edition can suddenly be trampled on in the subsequent ones. Richard Burton’s translation makes no
exception. In 1893, it was published in its unabridged form, and in 1927, it was published again with attenuations and omissions.

Although the publishers’ note of the second edition appears similar to the one in the first edition, this time it refers to “some corrections”:

Publishers’ Note: In reissuing this edition of “Il Pentameron”, the American Publishers desire to say that the manuscript was originally placed in the possession of Messers. Henry and Company of London by Lady Burton, in pursuance of agreement. The work was issued in two volumes by Henry and Company in 1893. This text represents a faithful rendering of these Neapolitan tales. This edition is a reprint of the first English edition and the Burton translation, with some corrections (Basile and Burton, 1927: 1).

Among these corrections there are a number of omissions and attenuations of which examples will be given further on in the second part of this essay.

2.7 Penzer’s Scholarly Translation

In 1932, Penzer publishes a translation of the Cunto de li Cunti specifically addressed to scholars and aimed at being less partial than the previous ones.

This edition was translated indirectly, through Croce’s Italian version, from which it borrowed all the extremely precious footnotes. It thus containing an incredible amount of information related not only to the mid 17th century Neapolitan culture but also to the translation process followed by both Croce and Penzer.

In his preface3 Penzer states that he “endeavoured to keep two main objects in view – first to translate literally, taking noun for noun and verb for verb, and secondly to preserve all the puns, local allusions, similes and metaphors of the original” (1932: vii).

Despite his laudable intentions, Penzer’s translation was not immune to attenuations and omissions, as we will see in the second part of this essay, when we will consider some examples from the fairy tale “The old woman who was skinned”.

3 In Appendix G the reader will find a copy of Penzer’s interesting preface, still very fresh and original despite the years, digitalised from a rare 1932 edition of his book that I was very fortunate to acquire from an antique bookshop in the UK.
2.8 Canepa’s Recent Translation

The history of the translation of the *Cunto de li Cunti* would not be complete without mentioning the most recent English translation, by the hands of Nancy Canepa, the well know scholar and translator of Basile whom we quoted at the beginning of this essay. Canepa is very adventurous in her translations and will not hesitate to translate, for example, “cacare” with “to shit” and “cacatoio” with “shitload” (2007: 29-31). The result is a very lively and entertaining translation that appears to fit in very well with the climax and target audience of the period in which the *Cunto de li Cunti* was written.

Part II

3. Examples from “The old woman who was skinned”

“The old woman who was skinned” is an extremely amusing tale on envy, the tenth and last one to be narrated in the first day of the *Cunto de li Cunti*, set within a framework that holds the various tales together much as Boccaccio’s Decameron or the Arabian Nights. The forty-nine tales are told “over a period of five days, ten per day for the first four days and nine in the fifth; the fiftieth is the frame tale which opens and closes the collection” (Canepa, 1999: 11).

The following is a brief summary of this tale, the complete translations of which can be found in Appendices A to F:

The King of Roccaforte falls in love with an old woman he has never seen at the mere sound of her voice, and, deceived by the sight of a dainty finger, takes her into his bed. When, however, he discovers the trick, he has her thrown from the window. She is left hanging from a fig tree and seven fairies change her into a beautiful girl and the King then takes her to wife. Her sister, envious of her good fortune and in order to become equally lovely, has herself skinned and dies ((Basile, Penzer, Croce 1932: 94).

3.1 Censorship in the title

The translation of the titles of Basile’s tales (also called *diversions*) is for the most part rather straightforward. A few tales, however, are entitled with the name of a character that never appears in the story. Such is the case, for example, of the second diversion of the second
day entitled *Verdeprato*. According to Penzer, “Basile meant to give his Prince the name of Verdeprato, but forgot to do so in the writing of the tale” (1932: 141).

Such an issue was easily addressed by either using footnotes, as Penzer did (1932: 141) or ignoring it altogether.

Yet when it came to “The old woman who was skinned” translators were faced with a much more difficult problem: the reference to an old lady being skinned was not likely to be considered as appropriate by many readers, especially so if foregrounded in the title.

We should note that quite differently from the previous example, this title fits in very well with the content of the story: an envious old hag skins herself in the attempt of becoming younger\(^4\). An ending that may appear shocking and perhaps even nonsensical to our eyes, but that was probably quite plausible in the mid 17th century when people were quite familiar with the mythological image of a self-consuming Envy:

In book 2 of the Metamorphoses Ovid describes envy as an old hag not dissimilar from Basile’s old woman (Ovid 79): ‘Eyes wild, teeth thick with mold, gall dripping green … / Envy is sleepless, her heart anxiety, / And at the sight of any man’s [sic] success / She withers, is bitten, eats herself away’ (Canepa, 2007: 125).

Let us examine how the various translators tackled this issue:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La Vecchia</td>
<td>The Old Woman</td>
<td>The Old</td>
<td>The Old</td>
<td>The old</td>
<td>The old</td>
<td>The old</td>
<td>La Vecchia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Scorticata</em></td>
<td>Discover</td>
<td>Discover</td>
<td>was skinned</td>
<td>was skinned</td>
<td>Scorticata</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see in this chart, Penzer (D), Canepa (E) and Croce (F) chose the literal translation: “The old woman who was skinned”. Burton instead decided to replace “skinned” with “discovered”, perhaps feeling that a straightforward translation would be inappropriate for his readers.

The tale, however, does not refer to anything being “discovered”, nor is this word related in

---

\(^4\) Basile was certainly not aware that what was then an absurdity would become a routine surgical operation (lifting) in modern day plastic surgery.
any way to the original Neapolitan word “scortecata”, which means “skinned” or “flayed”, as we can see from the following dictionary entry (Picchi, 2007):

Scorticare:

1. (= scuoiare) to skin, to flay
2. (= produrre un’abrasione) to graze, to bark, to skin, to excoriate (form); (= raschiare) to scrape (off), to abrade; (= graffiare) to scratch, to scuff.

The title chosen by Burton appears therefore rather questionable. Other examples of inaccuracies in Burton translation are referred by Penzer in his preface (1932: v-x) included in Appendix G.

I should add however, that despite these inaccuracies, Burton’s original version of 1893 remains arguably the most enjoyable and amusing, a value judgment that may well be based only on my personal taste and on a marked preference for domesticated translations.

3.2 Censorship in the text: a fart, a belch or a sneeze?

Undoubtedly the lively and colourful Neapolitan language played a large role in the success of Basile’s tales. However, when it became too lively, if not blatantly obscene, translators were faced with the difficult choice of either completely omitting some passages or attenuating them.

For example, let’s consider the opening passage of “The old woman who was skinned”, of which I have included an extract taken from Penzer’s translation (1932: 94):

In a garden overlooked by the palace of the King of Roccaforte there had gone to live two old women who were the summary of all misfortunes, the record of all monstrosities and the register of all ugliness. Their hair was uncombed and dishevelled, their brows wrinkled and knotty, their eyebrows shaggy and bristly, their eyelids swollen and heavy, their eyes dull and bloodshot, their faces lined and yellow, their lips thick and their mouths crooked, and finally they had a goat’s beard and hairy breast, hunchbacked shoulders, shrivelled arms, weak, flabby legs and distorted feet. For these reasons, in order that not even the sun could see their hideous appearance, they

---

5 The fascinating musicality and rhythm of the Neapolitan language can be fully appreciated only by actually listening to the tales being read out loud, as they were originally in the courts and squares of Naples. An audio file was thus included in the CD-ROM in which this fairy tale is performed in ancient Neapolitan by Maria Luisa Santella, a well-known character actress from Naples. Further information on Maria Luisa Santella can be found in the Italian Wikipedia (http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Luisa_Santella, accessed 31 March 2009).
lived hidden away in a basement under the windows of the noble lord. **The king was brought to this point; that he was not even able to sneeze without upsetting these old hags, for they grumbled and complained about everything.** First they said that a sprig of jessamine had fallen from the window and bruised their heads, then that a torn letter had hurt their shoulders, and then that powder had crushed their hips.

As shown in the following chart, Burton (B), Canepa (E), Croce (F) translated “pideto”, literally, with “fart”. The publishers (C) of Burton’s second edition surreptitiously corrected the word “fart” with “belch” while Penzer (D) decided to go for a more aristocratic “sneeze”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pideto</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fart</strong></td>
<td><strong>Belch</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sneeze</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fart</strong></td>
<td><strong>Scoreg gia</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo quale era arreduto a termene che non poteva fare no <strong>pideto senza dare a lo naso de ste brute gliannole, che d’ogne poco cosa ’mbro soliavano e le pigliava lo totano.</strong></td>
<td>And it had come to this, that he could not even <strong>fart</strong> but that these two would talk and observe his doings.</td>
<td>And it had come to this, that he could not even <strong>belch</strong> but that these two would talk and observe his doings.</td>
<td>The king was brought to this point: that he was not even able to <strong>sneeze</strong> without upsetting these old hags, for they grumbled and complained about everything.</td>
<td>The king was reduced to such a state that he couldn’t even <strong>fart</strong> without causing those old pains in the neck to wrinkle their noses, for they grumbled and threw themselves about like squid over the smallest thing.</td>
<td>Il re era ridotto a questo, che non poteva tirare una <strong>scoreg gia</strong> senza dar nel naso a quei brutti cancheri, che d’ogni minima cosa mormoravano e borbottavano.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of course, some theorists of translation studies may well argue that from a theoretical standpoint a “sneeze” or a “belch” will serve the same purpose of a less elegant “fart”, at least as far as the plot of the story is concerned. Yet by choosing the word “belch” or “sneeze”, Penzer (D) and the editors of Burton’s second edition (C) are obliged to omit the following part of the source text: “dare a lo naso” (“disturb the nose”), translated masterfully by Canepa with “to wrinkle their noses”. In fact it wouldn’t make much sense to wrinkle one’s noses upon hearing a belch or a sneeze.

Of the five translations considered, Penzer’s (D) certainly stands out as the most interesting since it was not based on the original Neapolitan version but on Croce’s Italian translation, as

---

6 I will leave it to the readers to judge if this can be considered a *correction*, as assumed by the publishers (see 2.6).
7 It would be a clear example of *dynamic equivalence*, theorised and widely adopted by Eugene Nida in his translations of the Bible.
previously mentioned. Yet Croce translated “pideto” (A) with “scoreggia” (“fart”) (F) and not with “sneeze” (D). It would thus seem that Penzer intentionally attenuated the word, turning it into a more candid “sneeze”, perhaps not to upset his delicate readers.

Nor can there be any doubt as to the meaning of the Neapolitan term “pideto” (A). It is certainly a dialectal variation of the similar Italian word “peto” (“fart”), as confirmed by the Neapolitan-Italian glossary in Petrini’s edition of the Cunto de li Cunti (1976: 739).

It should be noted, furthermore, that since ceilings were made of wood, the poor who lived in the “bassi” (the lower, more modest parts of a building) had to put up with a large number of daily annoyances coming from above, of which noise was probably the least noxious. One can only imagine the great fun that this passage would elicit in those who actually occupied the lower quarters: “This scene would be a comical magnification of the usual differences among neighbours forced to live at close quarters” (Canepa, 1999: 117).

**Conclusion**

The examples and the prefaces of the various editions examined, confirm that Basile’s tales have indeed been censored, either completely, as in the case of Tailor’s translations, or through omissions and attenuations, as in the case of the second edition of Burton’s translation and Penzer’s translation.

This was partly due to the fact that Basile’s tales were often erroneously addressed to an audience of children, for which it was felt that they were not particularly suited, such that they had to be either stripped of all inappropriate language or removed from an edition.

As we have seen, censorship appears to have gone hand in hand with the history of fairy tales, which were not originally meant to be written or read, but narrated through the oral medium that is by nature far more liberal than the written form.
Reference List:


Index of Appendices:

Neapolitan Source Text

A. “The old woman who was skinned”, 1634

English Translations

B. “The old woman who was skinned”, Burton, 1893 (1st edition)
C. “The old woman who was skinned”, Burton, 1927 (2d edition)
D. “The old woman who was skinned”, Penzer, 1932
E. “The old woman who was skinned”, Canepa, 2007

Italian Translations

F. “The old woman who was skinned”, Croce, 1925

Preface

G. Preface, Penzer, 1932

[Words: 4.828]