

“Pippi in Spain: repercussion in the press. From silence to polemics and to success”

Pedro C. Cerrillo, Cristina Cañamares,

Translation: A. Jesús Moya

CEPLI. University of Castilla-La Mancha. Cuenca (Spain)

The knowledge of Astrid Lindgren’s literary work in Spain began in 1974, when the TV series *Pippi Longstocking* began airing. Some of the Swedish author’s books had been published, although with obvious delay with comparison to her first editions, but they were silenced by the press, and especially by the educational system. In a country, which was living under a totalitarian regime, the ones responsible for the educational system saw Lindgren’s books, especially *Pippi*, as a serious danger for the children’s minds, which they targeted.

The first literary works from Lindgren in Spain

In 1958, when Astrid Lindgren won the Andersen Award, she was already recognized for her broad and well known work: The success of *Pippi Longstocking* (*Pippi Langstrump*), after winning the literary contest by the publishing house Rubén & Sjögren in 1945, the translation into more than 60 languages was unstoppable. Nonetheless in 1958 Lindgren’s *Cartas a Brita Mari* was the only known work in Spain.¹

Spain was still living under a rough and traumatic post civil war under the dictatorship of general Franco. The international isolation was not only a consequence of the outside rejection of this government, imposed by a military Coup d’état, but also a wish of their own government to prevent influence from other countries. In this situation it is not unusual that the existence of such a transgressing work such as *Pippi* was ignored, in which the protagonist lives a very different reality than that of a child, or an adult. For this reason, it is a bit surprising that *Cartas de Brita Mari* was already translated and published in Spain in 1949, “only” five years after its appearance in Sweden. It is especially surprising after we read what some of the opinions of the young

¹ Translated by Elvira de Yuste and with illustrations by Lozano Olivares. Barcelona: Hymosa, 1949. (Published in “Novelas para jovencitas”).

Brita Mari were regarding the role of women, which were unheard of during that time in Spain:

(...) I have a burning desire to get married after I have reached an older age... But before this, I want to learn something so that I can defend myself in life. I want to know something to the core and try to be a complete woman, who can value herself without reducing herself to a mere apprentice of a man. I will learn a trade or a profession. (Hürlimann, 1968: 188).

During that epoch in Spain censorship existed, which consisted of an administrative process, which completely or partially prohibited a literary work if it did not fit the “correct necessities” for the imposed norms. Brita Mari’s ideas did not fit the way of thought, which was being imposed in Spain during those years, in which she defended literature for children:

Beneficial and well-balanced, funny and enjoyable, (...), moral interpretations more in line with a modern pedagogic concept (...)²

In those days many Spanish schools were still reading fragments from books like *La Buena Juanita*, by Padre Fomari (1885?), in which other values were demanded than those expressed in Brita Mari:

Juanita is a child, which has not yet turned eight. She is very loving to the whole world, and apart from being very kind, she is also very studious. Her mother teaches her the chores of the house little by little. She also goes to school, and listens with respect and attention to the explications of the schoolteacher (...) If she continues this way Juanita will soon be a woman of her house (...) If you, dear children, desire to imitate her, you, too, will be as kind and as respected like her (...) Everyone will love you very much, and when you are older they will look upon you as models for women. (Fornari, ¿1885? 1998: 47-48).

² Opinions such as these were written in the most read educational publications, during the same year during which the Swedish writer’s book appeared. (Vid. Francisco Garfias: in *Magisterio Español*, 7th of September, 1949, p. 648).

It is not strange, therefore, that the press, like the educational system, silenced the works of Astrid Lindgren: we were unable to find just one single reference about her publication in Spain during 1949 from *Cartas a Brita Mari*, nor about her winning the Andersen award, nor about the ceremony on the 10th of May, 1958 at the closing ceremony of the IBBY at the Palacio Vecchio of Florence. During the next 15 days following this date there is not a single mention in three national papers of a broad circulation: *La Vanguardia*, *Ya*, and *El Alcázar*.

From the first Spanish edition of *Brita Mary*, three years passed until another one of Lindgren's works appeared in Spain: *Ramus and the Beggar (Ramus pa luffen)*, published towards the end of 1961, by the publishing house Doncel³, five years after its publication in Sweden. This publishing house included in its collection "La ballena alegre (The Happy Whale)", with which it wanted to renovate the ultra-conservative outlook upon Children's Literature in Spain, something this work certainly did without question.

On this occasion, the newspaper *Ya* (January 31, 1962, p. 17) included in its section titled "Lecturas para niños y adolescentes", a brief, plain, and unsigned review of the book in a five lined column, where one was able to read:

It is a clear narration of andersian heredity. The only difference is that in it the anecdote prolongs this for almost a whole novel [clearly a disqualifying comment]. Sentimental and optimistic is what Lindgren's narration shows in her series of tales which Doncel has published.

It is probably the first mention which the Spanish press made about Lindgren's book, which at this time reached the 16th year of its first edition of *Pippi*, and Lindgren being a renowned writer in half the world.

Just in January of 1962 did the publishing house *Juventud* publish its first Spanish edition of *Pippi*, with the title of *Pipa Mediaslargas*⁴; but from January until April there was no mention in the three newspapers which had the highest print run in Spain during

³ Translations from Marcelo Arroita-Jáuregui and illustrations from Máximo.

⁴ Translated by Blanca Ríos and with illustrations by Richard Kennedy.

this time (*Ya*, *Abc*, and *La Vanguardia*), and during that whole year the most important education publishing houses (*Bordón*, *Magisterio Español*, and *Escuela Española*) did not include a single reference to the book, even though they had “novedades editoriales” (leading articles) sections or “libros recomendados”(recommended books).

***Pippi* on Spanish Television**

The broadcasting of the series *Pipa Calzaslargas*, by TVE started on the 9th of November of 1974, and it was aired all Saturdays until May of 1975⁵, by chapters of 30 minutes each. Only during the last months of the Franco government in Spain, when the censorship was not as strict, was it possible for the Spanish public to meet *Pippi*. The series was well received by Spanish children, which did not avoid a great controversy from the press of the epoch, still 30 years after the book was written by its author.

The success amongst Spanish children was confirmed by the audience ratings of the series: in February, already three months after its première, the ratings showed a success of 7.2 out of 10, which placed it on the 19th spot of the preferred programs. During all of the series’ airings it maintained this rating, while reaching its highest point during April of 1975 with a 7.6, which sent it to the 12th spot for the preferred programs for the Spanish.

The controversy started only after the 4th chapter of the aired series. The newspaper *Ya* set the stage where this controversy took on its greatest presence for two fundamental reasons: for one, because letters from the viewers started to arrive, stating opposing opinions, and the second being that the newspaper columnist, and herself an expert of Childrens’ Literature, Monserrat Sarto, wrote a long article⁶, in which she made a reasoned defense of the goodness of Astrid Lindgrens’ story and found the delay it took it to succeed in Spain strange. Amongst other things, she said:

⁵ In the year 1979 it was broadcasted for the second time; from July until December in 1987, for the third time.

⁶ *Ya*, 11th of January, 1975, p. 4.

The Pippi bomb has exploded. The deed is amazing, and even more so the delay, now that Pippi Longstocking appeared in Spain in 1962...During which time no educators, psychologists, nor one literary critic seemed to be surprised. Now, yes (...)[And one asks himself how this could happen]: Because television is watched by adults from comfortable chairs in their house and children's books need to be read, something which an adult does not easily do. Despite that, the series says and shows exactly that which the book does, and for three years it has been read not only by Spanish children, but also by the main educated countries...[In his defense of Pippi, Monserrat Sarto was very explicit]. The distance between the reality of the child and that of the character give it sufficient space so that the psychology does not get damaged. On the other hand, it is possible that the tenderness and ingenuity of Pippi fills the children's hearts...It is difficult for a critic and a professor of children's literature, accustomed to reading that which is written for children and to study the consequences of the lecture, would reject Pippi. On the contrary, they would receive this modern and entertaining character with joy; she who makes children so happy.

Monserrat Sarto's justified and reasoned opinion clashed with those of the newspaper, which was, ideologically speaking, very close to the ecclesiastical authority. In fact, an article added on that same day by Agustín Losada, a lawyer, judged her article and requested that the series be pulled from TVE by the Ministro de Información (Minister of Information) (of whom the censorship was dependent) because:

It forms part of an immoral or amoral avalanche, which impregnates the avid sponges of our children's heads...[referring to the "insignificant films"] which exalt harmful ideologies, and are skillfully spread by television [Ya, 11th of January, 1975, p. 4].

After a week, those responsible for the newspaper requested opinions from a series of "experts" on education; the success that *Pipi* was having among Spanish children worried those responsible for the newspaper, who confirmed the following:

The mix of the miraculous power, and the anarchic life [of the protagonist] could negatively affect children...(Ya, sección “Ya Tele”, 18th of January, 1975, p. 4).

The opinions of the so-called “experts” summoned by the newspaper mostly coincided with the negative judgement about the series with those from that newspaper. Here we can see some of those opinions:

Pippi is the protagonist of a series, which could not have positive influences on her followers (...) Her ease, disorder, abilities to deceive, education, exaggerated intelligence, etc., could create the image of a fantastic girl in boys’ minds, by real actions, but with contradictory effects to those which the learning process demands (...)[Ricardo Calle, professor of Pedagogy: Ya (Tele), 18th of January, 1975., p. 5].

As it can be expected, *Pippi* did not only bother them because of her practice of individual freedom, but also her “exaggerated intelligence”. Anyhow, what angered those so-called experts the most was the influence *Pippi* could exert upon Spanish children:

The worst is that with her contagious behavior, Pippi seems to transmit values which can be summarized to “do whatever comes to mind” to our children... This in turn results as a completely false and fatal intervention to the educational process, which has to deal with its children. [Carlos Veira, journalist: Ya (Tele), 18th of January, 1975, p. 5].

On the same day the cited newspaper offered the opinion from the psychologist Luis Riesgo, whose judgement was as old-fashioned as it was surprising:

As adults, like children, we laugh at Pippi’s ideas. We think that we have provided our children with a sane entertainment, but this is absolutely not the case...[and he explained], because the skirt of the protagonist falls shorter than the story...[Ya (Tele), 18th of January, 1975, p. 5].

This whole reaction was a loyal reflection of an ultra-conservative thought pattern from one part of Spanish society; they were living the last years of the Franco regime and those social sectors continued to defend the maintaining of a directing, moralistic, and exemplary education, in which there was no capacity for imagination, creativity, or freedom of thought. In any case, the series continued to broadcast and immediately started to gain more defenders: the members of the board from *Ya* had to realize that they were “nadaban contracorriente” (swimming against the stream). Therefore, in later days, in the same newspaper they included diverse opinions favorable to the series, such as those of the novelist Jesús Torbado, who said:

I enjoy Pippi, she touches me and I applaud her at my children's side, who also enjoy it. They laugh, and they should think that there is a world only made for children where they can talk with a horse, and to be proud of a dirty nose or to lose a whole afternoon chasing crickets. [Ya (Tele), 1st of February, 1975, p. 6].

Although *Pippi* was controversial in those days of Spanish history, in the end she was finally accepted. The journal *Triunfo*⁷, of a progressive tendency, dedicated a large report signed by Pedro Fernández Cocero, who, after living for two years in Visby, where *Pippi* was from, offered very broad information about the persona, the city, the origin of the book and its subsequent success, including the controversy which arose in Sweden from its first edition.

More surprising still was when the conservative newspaper ABC published the article “Pipi Calzaslargas. Un canto a la libertad y a las cosas sencillas” (Pippi Longstocking. A chant for freedom and simple things), in which it stated:

Pippi is above all expression in the world of a child, and the defense of freedom in this child's world. (Corral, 1975: 46).

Pippi was the beginning of a powerful renovating movement which would continue to develop itself, especially in the 60's, when the authoritarianism and the imposed didactic belief from adults broke away, and gave autonomy to Children's Literature: the autonomy

⁷ See *Triunfo*, 12th of April, 1975, pp. 42-45.

was especially based on aesthetic and literary aspects, and not on pedagogic aspects. For the first time childhood was seen by adults by a different point of view and, without doubt, closer to reality.

To the conclusion

The girl, whom Astrid Lindgren created, is funny, strong and, above all, free. The author knew that it was a transgressing novel, which would provoke reactions of rejection: as it was strongly criticized in Sweden when it appeared for the first time – especially by the educational system- therefore it cannot come as a surprise that in Spain, which was governed by an authoritarian system, it was first silenced and later questioned when the success was unstoppable. These are not isolated instances: the French publishing house Hachette censored its 1962 edition, substantially altering some passages. Either way, one thing is certain, as Alison Lurie writes (1998:29):

Nowadays, this Pippi with a neglected look, who laughs at the educational system and is capable of defeating a strong man at the circus, has changed into an international hero for children.

As well in Spain, although a bit later than in other countries.

References

- CORRAL, Enrique del (1975): “Pipi Calzaslargas. Un canto a la libertad y a las cosas sencillas”. En *ABC (Blanco y Negro)*, 23 de febrero, pp. 41-47.
- FORNARI, Padre (¿1885?, facs.1998): *La buena Juanita*. Madrid: Edad.
- HÜRLIMANN, Betina (1968): *Tres siglos de literatura infantil europea*. Barcelona: Juventud.
- LURIE, Alison (1998): *No se lo cuentes a los mayores. Literatura Infantil, espacio subversivo*. Madrid: Fundación GSR.