

On Female Robinsons, Adaptations and Translations

An Interview with Anne Birgitte Rønning by Biljana Dojčinović



Anne Birgitte Rønning is associate professor at the Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages (ILOS) at the University of Oslo, Norway. She is also the author of the digital database *Female robinsonades: A Bibliography*.

How did you come up with the topic of female robinsonades?

As a young scholar I was put to work on the robinsonade genre for a trial lecture, and on that occasion I read Jeannine Blackwell's article "An Island of Their Own" from 1985. What fascinated me more than the master story, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, was her counting of twenty-six "female robinsonades", none of which I had ever heard of. But why were there seventeen German shipwreck stories with female heroines from the eighteenth century, and only a couple of English and Dutch ones? And what was the link between the French one from 1787 and the one for children from 1834? I was also intrigued by Blackwell's assumption that the novels with female heroines were written by female authors – this is generally often not the case, and from a gender perspective it would be just as interesting to study male narratives with female castaways, and vice versa!

Ten years after the trial lecture, I had the time to further investigate the phenomenon, and I decided to do systematic research and document whatever I could find of texts that could possibly be defined as "female robinsonades". As these works often travelled across geographical and linguistic borders, often with similar but varying titles, with vague, pseudonymous, or no ascription of author or translators, the best way to account for and systematize the findings was a descriptive bibliography, with very detailed information on the edition level (author ascription, publishers, format, illustrations, etc.). As a research tool, the bibliography thus indicates the spread of the genre, both geographically and temporally.

What is the time span of your DB? How many works does it include?

I have mainly documented texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but in some cases I have also registered recent re-editions of older works. From the period 1719–1900 I have documented ninety-two works with a total of approximately

four hundred editions.

There are pragmatic reasons for setting 1900 as an upper date limit. I was searching for forgotten works – part of “the great unread” – and literature from the twentieth century is easier to trace. It certainly does not imply that the genre as such is out of date. Shipwrecks and survival on a more or less desert island is still a popular topic, in a number of media and modes. And there are female protagonists described by male authors, for instance Giraudoux’ *Suzanne ou le Pacifique* from 1921 and Coetzee’s *Foe* from 1986; and female writers in the twentieth century used the desert island scene to evoke tomboyish girls, as in the Czech Marie Majarová’s *Robinsonka* from 1940, or modern existential philosophical issues as in the Danish Solvej Balle’s poetic novel *Lyrefugl* from 1986. A common trait in these novels is a critique of modern European civilization.

What about the gender of the authors and the number of languages?

Since I define “female robinsonades” as robinsonades written by female authors and/or with female protagonists, the database includes both male and female authors. At the work level, basic categories are readership (adult or children) and kind: “real” robinsonades and “pseudo-robinsonades” in which the title’s “Robinson” indication is metaphorical and the struggle for survival takes place in other places than an island – the Jardin des Tuileries, the Siberian forest, the American prairie.

While the authors registered come from less than ten European countries, I have documented robinsonade editions in more than twenty different languages

You started your DB in 2010. How did you structure it, and do you revise the categories in DB? If so, how often?

The database was developed by ICT people at the faculty, in close contact with me. As literary scholars seldom have the technical knowledge to produce applications themselves, an open and thorough dialogue between scholars and developers is needed. In my experience this dialogue is also very valuable because one has to be more specific about one’s own research questions. Still, it has been a bit

overwhelming sometimes, as there are so many decisions to be taken, and no literary colleagues to discuss with.

The developers, for their part, were very conscious of making a bibliography application that could also serve other scholars. The structure is therefore quite flexible, and while the basic categories have remained unchanged, I have revised the details and presentation as I have been working on the material.

In the text published in this issue of Knjiženstvo, you write about Isabelle de Montolieu's reworking of Johann David Wyss' Der Schweizerische Robinson (1812/1813). It raises many issues about authorship, translation, adaptation, sequels, and other aspects that remain important today. Is this a uniquely complicated case among the robinsonades, or are there more? Can we compare today's understanding of translation and adaptation to the nineteenth century one?

I believe this is a particularly complicated (and, from a gender perspective, particularly interesting) case of authorship and translation, but it is not the only one. Translation most often meant adaptation, and abridgements, expansions, and diverse means of making a text more relevant to new readers were current. Besides, popular works in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries travelled; they were translated not only once but several times, and without international legal restrictions. One translation might serve as the “original” of further translations. Both Defoe's and Campe's works up till today are most often published in adapted and abridged versions. An interesting example of expansion in the female robinsonade corpus is the French [La nouvelle Robinsonette](#) from 1895, with the authorial ascription “E. Granstrom, adapté du russe avec l'autorisation de l'auteur par Léon Golschmann & Ernest Jaubert”. This is in fact an adaptation of the Swedish novel [Öjungfrun](#) (The island maid) from 1832, written by Gustaf Henrik Mellin. The French work has a slightly different ending than the Swedish one, and is expanded by a narrative on the Krakatau volcano (which erupted long after the first Swedish publication). I have found a [Russian version](#) of the work from 1892, which credits both Mellin and Granström/Granstrem as authors, and from which the French version must have been translated. So far I have not been able to decide if the Krakatau expansion was made in the adaptation to Russian or French.

One of the robinsonades in your database is entitled Robinsonka na Balkáne. Can you tell us something about it? Was it about a woman from the Balkans, or a woman trying to survive in the Balkans?

In fact, I don't know yet, as I have not been able to read it. It was written in Czech by the male author Josef František Andrlík in [1893](#). I would be happy to learn more about this work, if there are readers who would share their reading with me.

You use the term “gender negotiations” in your text about Isabelle de Montolieu’s book. Could you sum up for us what it designates? Is it something that is a permanent trait of the genre which has the somewhat oxymoronic title female robinsonades?

Since the robinsonade is usually understood as a narrative of male adventure, and of the upbringing of boys, the presence of women and girls – not least their survival under extremely unfamiliar conditions – is argued for and motivated in various ways. When in [Le Robinson de douze ans](#), Felix’ widowed mother believes he is shipwrecked and wants to go to sea to search for him, Madame Mallès de Beau lieu informs us that she first received geography lessons from the schoolteacher in her home village. And motherless young Emma in Catherine Woillez’ [Emma ou le Robinson des demoiselles](#) (1834) survives because her father has taught her not only piety and music, but agriculture and shooting by bow and arrow, and the novel engages equivocally in a discussion on Rousseauian education. Such elements of narrative, as well as Isabelle de Montolieu’s evocation of girl readers and female aesthetics in paratexts, are manoeuvres to claim space and a *raison d’être* of female protagonists on the desert island and in the robinsonade genre. “Negotiating” and “negotiation” have been buzzwords in the humanities for some time, but as they connote trade, value, and politics, I really find “gender negotiations” to be a precise term for what is going on in these *bargaining* processes. But of course, the term is not restricted to this genre: there are – and have been – negotiations of gender going on in all areas of art and culture.