Empowering Transformations: Mrs Pepperpot Revisited


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For those of us who were once fans of Mrs Pepperpot—and it’s surprising how many come out of the woodwork, wearing a smile, when you mention that name—this volume is essential reading. It grew out of a conference held in June 2012, at Hedmark University College in Norway, entitled *Alf Prøysen’s Literature for Children*, in preparation for the centenary of Prøysen’s birth, in 2014. I have to say that I knew nothing about the man till I saw this volume. In fact, on a bad day I might have struggled to remember who wrote those Mrs Pepperpot books.

What emerges from this volume, though, is a far more rounded portrait of the author, whose range of material was considerable, producing—aside from his children’s fiction—a very popular adult novel, a volume of short stories, some 750 other short fictional pieces (later collected into eight volumes!), poetry, drama, material for TV and radio, two volumes of memoirs, illustrations, and some songs, which he also performed. As the editors put it, he was a “multi-talented mega-celebrity” in Scandinavia (2). For those that don’t know Prøysen’s most famous creation, though, here’s how she was first introduced to readers in 1955:

There was once an old woman who went to bed at night as old women usually do, and in the morning she woke up as old women usually do. But on this particular morning she found herself shrunk to the size of a pepperpot, and old women don’t usually do that. The odd thing was, her name really was Mrs Pepperpot. (quoted on 1)

And, armed with this volume, you have the perfect toolkit for including this Norwegian author on your children’s literature course, with some excellent critical material to help you explore the various dimensions of Prøysen’s lively character. Thus one of the first things we learn is that her name was not originally Mrs Pepperpot but “Mrs Teaspoon,” as both the Norwegian and Swedish texts have it. This comes as a blow, as the former name seems so much more apposite, capturing not just her size and uprightness—a teaspoon conjures up notions of a recumbent figure—but also her fieriness, for she is by no means a stereotypical, kind old woman; she is forceful and crafty, as captured in her English name, which suggests, as Maria Lassén-Seger points out, “that she is peppery and presumably too hot to handle” (26). The books

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have certainly been an international success, being translated into 23 languages, including Japanese, where she also featured in an anime TV series (confusingly called Spoon Oba-san [2], which I managed to track down on YouTube). I also learned that a complete corpus of the Mrs Pepperpot stories is unknown, as there are some stories available only in Norwegian and others only in Swedish. Moreover, to complicate matters further, Prøysen regularly reworked his Mrs Pepperpot stories.

This volume, Empowering Transformations, is divided into three parts, the first covering “Power, Ethical Impact and Gender,” the second examining “Nature, Technology and Authorial Background,” and the third tackling “Illustration, Intermediaity and Translation.” The first part opens with a chapter by Maria Nikolajeva, “The wisdom of old Mrs Pepperpot: a cognitive approach,” pursuing a line of research that she has explored extensively in recent years. Nikolajeva asks why Mrs Pepperpot, an adult, would appeal to children, finding the answer in the character’s shrinking ability, which, she argues, like “any metamorphosis, is a carnivalesque device” (15). I wouldn’t call her change in size “metamorphosis,” which, for me, would have to involve a change in form; but the idea that her shift in size “creates defamiliarisation” is sound, even though I don’t go along with the idea that it is this, in particular, that “stimulates readers’ cognitive activity” (19). Lassén-Seger’s chapter, “Miniature metamorphosis: Mrs Pepperpot empowered,” also uses the term “metamorphosis” (as does Anne Skaret’s), though again, I’d want to restrict its use to some of Lassén-Seger’s other examples (e.g. Eustace’s change into a dragon in C.S. Lewis’s The Voyage of the Dawn Treader). Rather than seeing Mrs Pepperpot’s changes as being wholly carnivalesque, though, Lassén-Seger seems to reserve this term for particular episodes (24–5), speaking about how Mrs Pepperpot’s general capacity for shrinking allows her to “see things ‘from underneath,’” allying her with “those who are small and weak, i.e. children and animals” (23). Quoting Caroline Hunt’s work, Lassén-Seger also notes the more disturbing aspects of shrinking, where it intimates non-existence. Finally, she also quotes Prøysen’s own point that “Mrs Pepperpot could never have been an old man” (26), for she exhibits “female power,” often changing when she’s engaged in domestic tasks—and even her name links her to the kitchen. But, as Lassén-Seger goes on to suggest, it is her shrinking that allows her to escape the limitations of domesticity and, in particular, to escape her bad tempered husband, who, Lassén-Seger informs us, is far more aggressive in the Scandinavian versions (27). Mrs Pepperpot is, thereby, “domestic and exotic, caring as well as cunning, tough as well as soft-hearted, and assuming adult responsibility as well as acting like a playful child” (29).

Mia Österlund writes from a different perspective in her chapter, “Queering Mrs Pepperpot: challenging the normative life script through queer aging.” As the author herself points out, queer theory should not be limited to sexuality but to any questioning of norms, including the notion that adulthood is the standard benchmark—what Nikolajeva has termed “aetonormativity” (35). Mrs Pepperpot certainly allies herself with children and animals, and Österlund suggests that, in travelling with animals (an episode with a cat is described), the “heterosexual norm” is disturbed, implying a “bonding between females of different species” (41).

Svein Slettan also explores Mrs Pepperpot’s links with animals in his chapter, “Down to earth: nature in the Mrs Pepperpot stories.” The animals might be anthropomorphised, but Slettan argues that this is always “within the frame of their own specific animality. Prøysen is interested in displaying the animals’ distinctive features” (49). Slettan draws attention to the way that she rides on animals, too, arguing that this allows her “to transgress the borders between animal and human, nature and culture” (50), and, in so doing, the books demonstrate an “ecological consciousness” (50), with Mrs Pepperpot herself providing us with what Geraldine Massey and Clare Bradford have termed “representations of ecocitizenship” (quoted on 53). In general, “traditional rural life” is shown to be superior to an urban existence; but, as Slettan also demonstrates, Prøysen does not “aestheticize nature,” in the manner of the English Romantics; it is a far more “down-to-earth” attitude that she represents, closer to that found in American pastoral works (54). This said, Slettan’s final sentence rather undermines this perception, being more evocative of a Romantic sensibility: “Prøysen shows us the way to the magic wood and the living community to which we all belong” (57).

Hans Kristian Rustad examines “Mrs Pepperpot and modern technology: empowerment and technopoetics in ‘Mrs Pepperpot’s Outing’.” For some reason, the author hyphenates this neologism, though its originator, Strother Purdy, does not. The concept, technopoetics, denotes a concern, as Rustad notes, with “the relation between literature and technology,” arguing that “literature can evoke literary (or aesthetic) aspects in machines, and that machines can evoke technological aspects in
This is the first article to look more restrictively at the Mrs Pepperpot corpus, concentrating on just one story, “Mrs Pepperpot’s Outing” (which might have provided Österlund’s “queering” chapter with a witty title, too!). Rustad’s article logically follows Slettan’s observations, linking Mrs Pepperpot’s “bonds to nature and animals” to a “lack of interest in modern technology” (59). In the story in question, the Pepperpots take a ride in Mr Pepperpot’s car, which he regards as “his hobby.” It is portrayed as metonymic of modernity, of technological progress, and Mr Pepperpot embraces it with alacrity. However, the power and control he thinks the car will give him is undermined by Mrs Pepperpot. Whereas he rejects “nature, animals, homemade food, tradition, and home” in favour of his car, the story shows how important are these very things that he wishes to abandon, while cars are shown to be, as we might say, merely useful vehicles.

Bjørn Ivar Fyksen in his chapter, “The under-dog’s perspective: childhood in Alf Prøysen’s adult prose work,” looks at one particular short story from his collection The Threshold Back Home, called “First Love”. Fyksen emphasises Prøysen’s working class credentials, being the son of a crofter, and whose first job was minding pigs. Fortunately it was not horses, which Prøysen had a fear of, whereas bulls, as he informs us in his memoirs, did not intimidate him at all (75). Prøysen was connected with the Norwegian labour movement and is, it is argued, a bona fide writer of working-class literature, in that his work is “about workers, by workers, for workers” (70). The title of this particular short story, “First Love,” is in extra quotation marks because it refers, apparently, to an old broadside ballad. It also refers, says Fyksen, to a girl’s childish love for a cowhand herding cattle, who regularly passes their crofter’s cottage. She confesses this love to her mother, who then, to the girl’s annoyance, tells the cowhand while flirting with him, mimicking the manner in which Lil’ girl had divulged her secret. This man is then invited into the cottage where, we are told, “The little girl sat stiff and quiet, tugging on a loose linen thread in the bedspread” (72). They continue to tease her, mocking her infatuation with him. Later the mother “notices the thread that cuts into the girl’s hand, and she cuts it off.”

This is rather unfortunately phrased, for it is the thread, not the hand, that is removed. As Fyksen comments, with this cut “the bond between mother and child is severed” (72) and, eventually, “the little girl emerges as the victorious one to such an extent that the ending reads like a revenge fantasy” (74). That is, the cowhand’s masculinity is undone when his fear of bulls (like Prøysen’s of horses) becomes public, for the bull he is herding runs amok. A farmer then shoots the bull and Lil’ girl approaches the dying beast, sitting down next to it. The cowhand attempts to make light of his behaviour, but Lil’ girl merely says to him, “Shut your mouf!” It sounds a powerful tale, with the child a central and vengeful figure:

[t]he motif of retribution is . . . central in Prøysen’s work for adults. His view of children is sympathetic, but childhood is often portrayed as a dark and vulnerable stage in life, a phase from which it is not enough to simply grow up. Instead, his characters have to fight, make their own mark and escape. In Prøysen’s short stories, children are not strange or cute, they are angry. (75)

This is a perceptive insight, but I wish that Fyksen had linked it more closely with Mrs Pepperpot, who also overcomes patriarchy and her diminutive size in order to establish her superiority. Like Mrs Pepperpot, Lil’ girl also exhibits, in the words of the title, an empowering transformation.

This chapter brings us to the end of Part II. Part III opens with a chapter by the editors themselves, entitled “Illustrating Mrs Pepperpot.” While Prøysen was the first to render his character visually, it is two other representations, one by the Norwegian Borghild Rud (almost a namesake!) and one by the Swedish Björn Berg, that have become iconic. However, they are quite distinct in style, and each respective nation sees its own artist as representing “the right and proper” Mrs Pepperpot (82). As Lassén-Seger and Skaret remark, “Berg’s illustrations pick up on the drama and action” whereas Rud’s pictures “create a calmer atmosphere” (86). But is Mrs Pepperpot “[r]ound and cosy or limber and energetic,” as a sub-heading has it? Rud depicts her in the former terms, seeing her as “content, stoic and calm,” whereas Berg’s Mrs Pepperpot is more “pointy and sharp,” suggesting “a more prickly temperament” (88). The editors pursue these characterisations, noting that Berg’s image of Mrs Pepperpot “suggests a young mind mirrored in a youngish body . . . an active and equal participant in . . . children’s games,” whereas Rud’s “appears to be an adult patiently
humouring her young companions” (89). In short, Rud emphasises “her calmness and stoicism,” whereas Berg’s illustrations “accentuate Mrs Pepperpot’s energy” (ibid.). Certainly, I find Rud’s illustrations awry, but then it is Berg’s version of the character that the British audience was weaned on.

In chapter 9, “Literary sculptures: Mrs Pepperpot across media,” Skaret examines Fritz Røed’s bronze statue of Prøysen, which has been “cast in four replicas placed on different locations in Norway where people can encounter them in their everyday-lives” (96). Skaret defines this statue as “a medial transposition of Prøysen’s work” (95), crossing borders just as the character Mrs Pepperpot does. It also reverses the long-established tradition of “ekphrasis,” wherein visual objects are transposed verbally, as, perhaps most famously, in John Keats’ poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” This said, there are other famous examples of characters being rendered in sculptures, such as Edvard Eriksen’s The Little Mermaid (1913), or, indeed, George Frampton’s Peter Pan, in Kensington Gardens (1912).

Bjørn Sundmark’s penultimate chapter, “Transforming text, tradition, and TV: the magic of Prøysen’s Mrs Pepperpot,” examines other transformations that Prøysen’s character has undergone, most notably from radio to TV, but also into other forms. As Sundmark informs us, “Mrs Pepperpot was present in all available media in 1967—print (books, journals, and newspapers), radio, TV—and paper calendar—on a daily basis for a month” (114); and he goes on to note: “It was hardly possible to avoid Mrs Pepperpot.” Notions of such media transformation being a new phenomenon are thereby challenged.

In the final chapter, “Mrs Pepperpot rules Britannia: the British editions,” Charlotte Berry examines how Prøysen’s character came to be published by Hutchinson, which was famous for its range of fiction for children of various ages. In 1989, the firm was taken over by Random House, to form “one of the UK’s ‘Top Five’ children’s publishers . . . whose authors include Jacqueline Wilson, Philip Pullman, Anne Fine, Michael Morpurgo and Roald Dahl” (118). Unfortunately, as Berry details, “[t]he in-house publishing archive of Rabén & Sjögren remains unavailable for external research access, just as the original editorial files from Hutchinson have not survived in England” (119), such that we do not know “how the publisher came to recommend the Mrs Pepperpot series to a British publisher” (ibid.). We do know that they were translated into English by Marianne Helweg, however, a woman of Danish heritage who was labelled “the polyglot playgirl of the BBC” during the Second World War (119). The first title translated by her, Little Old Mrs Pepperpot, appeared in 1959, and it was she who decided “not to use the literal translation of the ‘teaspoon-lady’.” The series has been in print ever since and, in the interim, Eleanor Graham made sure that Puffin secured the rights for paperback editions of Prøysen’s work. Graham’s successor, Kaye Webb, was also a fan, despite, we are told, “some teachers’ letters of complaint” about “how much the stories lack morally [and] imploring this book [be] withdrawn from circulation immediately” [sic] (121). Unfortunately, this success was not to be repeated in America, although Random House, it seems, remains committed to the series; as Berry notes:

> The status of Mrs Pepperpot as one of the most popular and enduring series of Scandinavian children’s literature within the United Kingdom remains unchallenged after more than half a century, with her current custodian Random House firmly dedicated to furthering her unique appeal within British shores and further afield. (125)

Long may she reign, is all I can say, and this volume should help justify and perpetuate her longevity. This is a valuable collection of essays, my only complaint being the lack of an index, to help one track one’s way through the work, concise though it is.

WORKS CITED
