

## The Reception and the Adaptation of Diana Coles' The Clever Princess in Japan

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# The Reception and the Adaptation of Diana Coles' *The Clever Princess* in Japan

Hideko Taniguchi

## 1. Introduction

Diana Coles' *The Clever Princess*, published in England in 1983, is one of the most widely-read feminist fairy tales in Japan. The Japanese translation of the story was published in 1989 under the title of *Arete Hime no Boken*, which means *The Adventure of Princess Arete*, as "an easy-to-understand feminist story for children", to be an alternative to conventional gender-biased princess fairy tales. Its clear-cut feminist appeal has elicited various responses and adaptations such as an animation movie, *Arete Hime [Princess Arete]* (2000).

This paper will explore the reception and the adaptation of *The Clever Princess* in Japan, focusing on such concerns as:

1. In regards to the Japanese translation, are there any particular transformations, modifications, or eliminations of the original text made to appeal to Japanese readers, especially to child readers?
2. How have Japanese readers responded to the feminist appeal of the story?
3. Concerning the themes and the plots, there seem to be some discrepancies between *The Clever Princess* and its animation adaptation, *Princess Arete*. How does the animation movie adapt the feminist theme of the original text?

## 2. *The Clever Princess*<sup>2</sup>

*The Clever Princess* is one of those feminist fairy tales which were written during the feminist movement in the 1970's and 80's. As Jack Zipes explains,

The feminist movement made its way into fairy tale writing between 1979 and 1983. . . . and during this period, male and female writers began an important dialogue about what constituted a fairy tale. As a reaction to sexist, racist and classist leanings of canonical tales, feminist writers began to subvert the older stories and create new ones.<sup>3</sup>

*The Clever Princess* is an alternative to conventional princess fairy tales. It raises a question to the stereotyped gender roles found in almost all fairy tales. In many conventional fairy tales, heroines

are passive, inactive, obedient, silent, and rewarded with a prince to support them, and, on the other hand, heroes, clever and courageous, pursue adventures, and they are rewarded with a beautiful and obedient princess.

*The Clever Princess* presents a new type of heroine, clever, active, and self-reliant, completely different from the traditional fairytale princesses who merely wait for a man to help them escape from the circumstance they are in. The heroine, Princess Arete<sup>4</sup>, is a princess who can help herself, not one who just keeps waiting to be helped by someone else. It is not a magical power or the appearance of a prince that helps her out of the imprisonment and life threatening situations imposed by the evil magician Boax. (He has taken her in exchange for a lot of jewels so that he can kill her, because a fortune teller told him that she would cause his death.)

In addition, *The Clever Princess* presents the solidarity, not the hostility, of women, which encourages the heroine placed in confinement. In the denouement after the heroine overcomes the three difficult trials imposed by the magician and his accidental death, the story even suggests the possibility of woman's participation in shaping politics and making laws.

### 3. The Japanese Translation of *The Clever Princess*

*The Clever Princess* was translated and introduced to Japanese child readers by Group Women's Place, a group of four female citizens interested in gender-equality. They found it at a women's center in London in 1984, a year after its publication. In 1989, they published the Japanese translation for educational or enlightening purposes. This is clearly seen in "Translators' Afterword" to the Japanese edition, which actually constitutes their commentary on the feminist fairy tale:

When we first read *The Clever Princess*, we were very glad to find at last a story of a girl who can tackle and overcome difficulties on her own.

....

Princess Arete overcomes every bitter trial imposed by the magician, with her courage and cleverness. In doing so, she never fights or hurts anyone.

....

Girls are usually expected to be gentle, sweet, and reserved. It would be wonderful if Princess Arete, who is really courageous, clever, generous, and vigorous, becomes a popular model for young girls.<sup>5</sup>

As O'Sullivan argues, "The educational status of children's literature...is particularly high at times when there are new values to be conveyed." Here, "translated children's literature plays an important part."<sup>6</sup> This applies in the case of feminist fairy tales. The English feminist fairy tale, *The Clever Princess*, can be used as a good vehicle for the introduction of a female model for girls completely different from such gender-stereotyped princesses as Cinderella and Snow White.

Shavit points out that the translators of children's literature permit themselves to manipulate the text in various ways by changing, enlarging, or abridging it or by deleting or adding passages, when adjustments of the text make it appropriate, useful and educationally good for the children; and an adjustment of plot, characterization, and language enables the children to read and understand the

text more easily.<sup>7</sup> Such adjustments are found in the Japanese translation of *The Clever Princess*:

1. The title is changed from *The Clever Princess* to *The Adventure of Princess Arete*.
2. The text is abridged: episodes, scenes, and descriptions of characters are abridged.
3. Cruel scenes and episodes are deleted. For example, the scene in which the littlest snake, Arete's pet and friend, swallows Boax's servant, who has been changed into a frog by the magician, is deleted.
4. The arrangement of some episodes is changed.
5. Nameless characters are given a name. An example is the witch who gives a magical ring to the heroine.<sup>8</sup> She is named Wysel.
6. There are some additions to the original text. For instance, the line "Next day, in the morning sunshine, Princess Arete started on a journey dashingly"<sup>9</sup> is added at the very end of the story. In the ending part, the heroine actually expresses her decision to travel for a while in order to see the world and to save people who need help. In the original text, her departure is only implied in the illustration of Mrs Ample and the witch waving their hands.

In addition to the above adjustments of the text, there are the following changes in order to attract the attention of the readers, which seem to have contributed to good sales for the book:

1. The color of the cover is changed from green to shocking pink, the color associated with woman and girl power.
2. The catch phrase "A princess just waiting is out of date!" is provided.
3. "Translators' Afterword" is added to the Japanese edition, where the appeal of the clever, self-reliant Arete as an alternative to gender-stereotyped heroines is emphasized.

According to the translators, at first no publishing company was interested in publishing the story of a clever and wise girl, but a local women's center in Yokohama, appreciating its feminist appeal, supported its publication. Because of this support and the thoughtful efforts of the translators and the publisher as well as the appeal of the text itself, the Japanese translation of *The Clever Princess* sold extremely well, and went through 8 editions in just the first 3 months.<sup>10</sup> Then, the group published two other versions of the feminist fairy tale: *The Clever Princess: English Language Textbook with Japanese Annotations* and *Arete Hime no Boken: Ehon [The Adventure of Princess Arete: A Picture Book]*.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Reactions to The Clever Princess in Japan

Unlike other translated children's literature and other translated feminist fairy tales, *The Clever Princess* elicited many and various responses – not only among child readers but also among adult readers. Women's centers and public and school libraries put it on a recommended reading list. Many young girls welcomed and admired the self-reliant, clever and wise Arete. Many pupils and students wrote essays on it, and a female junior high school student wrote an essay titled "Arete Hime de Itai [I Want to Be a Princess Arete]" and got the first prize in a nationwide essay contest.<sup>12</sup> The story received high appreciation from the mass media. *Asahi Shinbun*, one of the leading newspapers,

for instance, approved of the self-reliant, clever heroine as a new role model for today's young Japanese girls in its column.<sup>13</sup> On the Internet, there are many favorable and unfavorable messages about the story. Those messages were mostly written by adult readers. Several theatrical companies, inspired by the story, wrote and performed original plays or musicals with such titles as *Arete* and *The Adventure of Princess Arete*, and were received well by the audience.<sup>14</sup> An animation movie, *Princess Arete*,<sup>15</sup> was written and directed by a male director. Some people read *The Clever Princess* only after they saw the animation movie and got interested in the book on which it is based.

Reactions to *The Clever Princess* are divided among Japanese readers, especially among adult readers: some are favorable and others are unfavorable. The following is made clear as a result of my research into essays written by students, book reviews, messages, and blogs on the Internet. Almost all young girl readers show a favorable response to it. They welcome the clever and self-reliant heroine as a new role model. So do many female adult readers. Some mothers recommend that their daughters read the book. On the other hand, some adult readers, male and female, do not show a very favorable response to it because of its "excessive" woman-centeredness and the characterization of male characters as stupid and evil. Some readers even criticize it as "female chauvinistic".

## 5. Readers' Criticisms and Adjustments in the Translation

Some of the readers' unfavorable comments *The Clever Princess* has elicited in Japan seem to have something to do with the adjustments of the original text in the Japanese translation. The most common comments are:

1. Princess Arete does not seem so clever.
2. Princess Arete does not undertake a real adventure.

Concerning the comment that the heroine does not seem so clever, the adjustments or abridgements of the original text seem to be a reason. The original text persuades the reader of her cleverness not only by using the adjectives, "clever" and "smart", but also by depicting in some detail the way she deals with difficulties.

Let us take, as an example, the scene where Arete prepares for the second task imposed by the evil magician. She is ordered to climb to the top of Windy Crag and bring back the ruby from the Golden Eagle's nest at the very top. The underlined parts are deleted in the Japanese translation:

When Mrs Ample and the littlest snake arrived in the cellar that evening, Arete was thinking hard. 'It's not going to be easy', she said. 'Eagles are very fierce, especially if you go near to their nest. But I've got a plan. If you both help me, I think I can succeed.'

Of course both were pleased to help her, so she explained what she wanted them to do.

The next morning, after eating an enormous breakfast of porridge and cream, kippers and tomatoes, toast and butter and honey, and hot, sweet tea, she set off wearing her new trousers. She also took a warm jacket because she knew it would be cold on the crag. In one pocket she had the littlest snake coiled up asleep. In the other she had three pounds of raw steak which Mrs Ample had given her from the kitchen.<sup>16</sup>

The three underlined sentences in the above passage, deleted in the Japanese translation, clearly show that the heroine tackles the problem on her own and that she is clever and wise. The sentence "Eagles are very fierce, especially if you go near to their nest" reveals that she knows the habit of eagles so well that she can think of the best procedure to get the ruby in the eagle's nest safely. Then, the line "she explained what she wanted them to do" indicates that she is clever and wise enough to know what she really needs for the journey: an enormous breakfast to gain physical strength; trousers and a warm jacket to keep herself warm in the freezing weather at the crag; a snake that eagles hate, in order to catch the eagle's attention and divert it from the nest; and three pounds of raw steak for the chicks in the nest, in order to keep them busy eating it so that they won't scream even when she approaches the nest and takes the ruby out of it.

The second comment that the heroine does not undertake an adventure is definitely derived from the word "adventure" in the Japanese title. In Japan, the word is sometimes included in the title of a story of a girl who is tough and self-reliant.<sup>17</sup> Then, the Japanese title *The Adventure of Princess Arete* can mislead the readers into expecting the story to be a warrior princess story rather than a story of a clever princess. It is true that *The Clever Princess* has a factor as an adventure story and that the book description on the back cover calls it an "adventure story of myth and magic". The point is that the heroine tackles the problems not with power and violence but with cleverness and consideration. Consequently, the story does not include any fighting scenes or breathtaking confrontations. This is why some readers feel that it upsets their expectations.

In addition, there seems to be a fixed idea in some Japanese readers that self-reliant, tough heroines are or should be associated with thrilling adventures and fierce fighting. In Japanese comics and animations, there are many fighting heroines such as cross-dressed or transformed heroines who not only fight fiercely but also seek out exciting, thrilling adventures. Then, some readers may feel that Arete's "adventures", in other words, tasks or trials, are not exciting or thrilling enough for them, because in *The Clever Princess* the heroine does not fight against the evil enemies or monsters but overcomes the difficulties with her cleverness, wisdom, cheerfulness, consideration, and the power of communication.

## 6. Animation Adaptation, *Princess Arete*

*The Clever Princess* has inspired theatrical plays, musicals, an animation movie, and so on. Above all, the animation adaptation, *Princess Arete*, written and directed by a male director, Sunao Kibatuchi, is one of the most important responses to the feminist fairy tale in Japan. The animation ran on Tokyo International Fantastic Movie Festival 2000, and was screened on a nationwide scale in 2001. In 2002, it received the 1st Tokyo International Anime Fair 21 Award for Excellence.<sup>18</sup> It has been broadcast on television several times, and is available on DVD. This animated feature, therefore, has generated many more responses and elicited far more discussions than any other adaptations, especially among adults both male and female. The reactions and discussions are roughly divided into two categories: the reaction concerning its themes and messages and the one concerning its artistic and technical aspects. Here, I will focus on its themes and messages including the discrepancies between the text and its animation adaptation.

The animation changes the plot and the setting of *The Clever Princess*, and moderates and generalizes

its clear-cut feminist messages. It seems to answer to some of the common criticisms on *The Clever Princess* by describing the cleverness and wisdom of the heroine in such detail as can persuade adult spectators, by adding exciting, thrilling scenes where the heroine struggles to rescue the villagers from the oppression of the magician, and by avoiding “excessive” woman-centeredness. In the animation, there is not such division of and hostility between the male and the female as are seen in *The Clever Princess*. In the fairy tale, female characters are described as wise and clever, good-natured, compassionate, active, happy, cheerful, and communicative, whereas male characters are depicted as stupid, evil, boring, and isolated. In the animation, however, the male characters are not necessarily depicted as evil and stupid. The magician Boax, who tries to kill the heroine, is not stupid or completely evil, and can even arouse the spectators’ sympathy because of the situation he is trapped in.

The characterization of Boax is closely related to the theme of the animation.<sup>19</sup> He is changed into the only survivor of a lost civilization, who is just waiting to be rescued in vain by his people evacuated from the earth long ago. Because of the presence of Arete, who is under a spell to be a “proper princess,” beautiful, passive, and obedient, he comes to identify himself with her and realize that he is just wasting his life waiting for a rescue and doing nothing, just like a stereotypical fairytale princess.<sup>20</sup> After the spell is broken, the heroine gets back to her clever, active, and self-reliant self, and escapes from the confinement on her own. The animation, thus, includes the story of Boax’s self-recognition and self-empowerment, that is, he, like Arete, should realize that his rescue is in his hands, not in others’, and should determine his own fate. In this respect, Boax is the double of Arete, and we can see the director generalizes, or blurs, the feminist theme into the search into the theme of humanity. The catch phrase for the animation, “A story of a girl who has found the hidden powers of the heart” clearly shows its message.

It is true that concerning the themes and the plots, there are big discrepancies between *The Clever Princess* and its animation adaptation, but it should be noted that the animation movie also lays stress on the story of a wise and clever, self-reliant princess, who does the rescuing of herself and others. Just like in *The Clever Princess*, the heroine would rather live by her own devices and make her own destiny. She is not a stereotypical fairytale princess who keeps waiting to be plucked from a difficult situation but a princess of our age who can overcome difficulties by using her wisdom and cleverness. Also in the animation, which emphasizes the importance of self-recognition and self-empowerment for both male and female, the clever, active, and self-reliant heroine is introduced effectively. As in *The Clever Princess*, the heroine is tough and active, but is not a tough fighting girl commonly seen in Japanese comics for girls. This shows that, though the clear-cut feminist theme in the original text is somewhat blurred in the animation, the director has paid serious attention to the feminist messages of the text.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Clever Princess* is one of the most important feminist fairy tales that have been translated in Japan for two reasons. First, it has introduced a clever, active, courageous, and self-reliant heroine, who overcomes difficulties using her intelligence and wisdom on her own. She is a tough heroine, but she is different from those tough heroines who show their toughness and

independence by fighting fiercely in thrilling confrontation with evil villains and monsters. It has also introduced the importance of the solidarity of women for their empowerment. Second, it has elicited various responses and, therefore, has offered a chance to think about gender-equality, and its feminist appeal has inspired some works such as the animated feature, *Princess Arete*. Many of the adaptations have modified the text so that its messages have wider appeal. In addition, after the publication of the Japanese translation of *The Clever Princess*, more heroines like Princess Arete are found in children's literature and TV dramas. Though it is not well-known in other countries, *The Clever Princess* has certainly marked a new epoch in Japan.

### Notes

- \* This paper is based on my presentation at the 19th Biennial Congress of International Research Society for Children's Literature in 2009.
  - \* All the English translations of the Japanese texts in this paper are my own.
1. Yokohama Josei Forum, "Atogaki [Afterword]", *Arete Hime no Boken [The Adventure of Princess Arete]* (Gakuyo Shobo, 1989), p. 70.
  2. This paper focuses on the reception and the adaptation of *The Clever Princess* in Japan. For a more detailed discussion on *The Clever Princess*, see Hideko Taniguchi, "Otogibanshi no Jenda to Feminisumu [Gender in Fairy Tales and *The Clever Princess*]", *Studies in Languages and Cultures*, 11 (2000), 29-38.
  3. Jack Zipes' lecture on modern feminist fairy tale writers reported in "Fairy Tales Getting a Feminist Facelift", *The Daily Texan on line*, November 5, 2007.
  4. In ancient Greek, Arete means valor or virtue.
  5. Group Women's Place, "Atogaki [Translators' Afterword]", *The Adventure of Princess Arete*, p. 71.
  6. Emer O'Sullivan, *Comparative Children's Literature* (Routledge, 2005), p. 62.
  7. Zahar Shavit, "Translation of Children's Literature", *The Translation of Children's Literature: A Reader* (Multilingual Matters, 2006), p. 26.
  8. The witch gives the magical ring to Arete, saying, "if you need anything, just rub it and wish. But remember, you've only got three wishes, so don't waste any of them." (Diana Coles, *The Clever Princess* (Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1983), p. 8.) The heroine, however, does not use her wish to get herself out of danger.
  9. Diana Coles, *Arete Hime no Boken [The Adventure of Princess Arete]*, Group Women's Place (trans.) (Gakuyo Shobo, 1989), p. 69. In this sentence, the translators use the adverb "sasso-to" or "dashingly", which is usually used in the description of men.
  10. Group Women's Place, "Hashigaki [Preface]", *The Clever Princess: English Language Textbook with Japanese Annotations* (Gakuyo Shobo, 1990), p. 3.
  11. Diana Coles, *The Clever Princess: English Language Textbook with Japanese Annotations*, (edited with notes by Group Women's Place) (Gakuyo Shobo, 1990). Diana Coles, *Arete Hime no Boken: Ehon [The Adventure of Princess Arete: A Picture Book]* (translated and abridged by Group Women's



- Place) (Gakuyo Shobo, 1992).
12. The writer of the essay was awarded the first prize in the 30th Zenkoku Chugakko Bungei Sakuhin Kakyoku Sosaku Konkuru in 1996.
  13. “Ten Sei Jin Go”, *Asahi Shinbun*, March 1, 1990. The English translation: “Vox Populi, Vox Dei”, *Asahi Evening News*, March 2, 1990.
  14. *Arete* by Company Tomorrow and *The Adventure of Princess Arete* by Company M.M.C.
  15. Sunao Katabuchi, *Arete Hime [Princess Arete]* (Studio 4°C, 2000).
  16. Diana Coles, *The Clever Princess*, pp. 37-38. In addition to the deletion of some words and sentences, there are a few minor modifications in the Japanese passage. For example, the phrase “in one pocket” is translated as “in the right pocket” and “In the other” as “In the left pocket.” (*The Adventure of Princess Arete*, pp. 48-49.)
  17. For example, the Japanese title of “Tatterhood”, a folktale of a spirited, courageous, and decisive girl, is “Borozukin no Boken”, that is, “The Adventure of Tatterhood”, (Ethel Johnston Phelps (ed.), “Tatterhood”, *Tatterhood and Other Tales: Stories of Magic and Adventure* (Feminist Press, 1979). Ethel Johnston Phelps (ed.), “Borozukin no Boken [The Adventure of Tatterhood]”, *Borozukin no Boken: Onnanoko no tamenno Sekai no Minwa [The Adventure of Tatterhood: World Folktales for Girls]*, Sayoko Uesugi (trans.) (Gakuyo Shobo, 1993).)
  18. At the 1st Tokyo International Anime Fair 21, *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi [Spirited Away]* by Hayao Miyazaki won the Grand Prize.
  19. In the animation movie, unlike in *The Clever Princess*, Boax is not eliminated from the story, and he plays a crucial role in the presentation of the theme.
  20. This episode does not appear in *The Clever Princess*.

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