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English 111

12 July 2025

Katherine Woods and *The Little Prince*: Creative Collaboration through Translation

“You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed” (Woods 71). As Katherine Woods translated this line from *Le Petit Prince* (*The Little Prince*) in the early 1940s, little did she know that these words would be true of her labors to translate—perhaps even tame—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s French children’s novella for American readers. According to Theera Rongtheera and Pornthip Supanfai in their article “Investigating Translators’ Styles in *The Little Prince*: A Corpus-Based Study,” Woods’s original translation of the novella is well regarded among American readers for the poetic style through which it explores the original novella’s core themes of love, the innocence of childhood, and the importance of friendship (48–49). Much of the celebrated poetic and meandering language in Woods’s translation was seemingly born from her creative license, as Saint-Exupéry’s original is more simplistic and direct in his native French. According to journalist Matt Kim, Woods’s 1943 rendition was the only English translation published for Americans until it was replaced by Richard Howard’s more literal translation in 2000. This fifty-seven-year gap seems to have allowed Woods’s distinctive choices to influence how generations of American readers perceive the book and its subsequent translations and adaptations. Just as Emily Apter asserts—in the introduction to her book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*—that translation transforms original works of literature into “a form of creative property that belongs fully to no one” (15), this essay will highlight how Woods’s stylistic, word, and phrase choices have led many American readers

and literary critics to view Woods not solely as a translator but as a creative collaborator with Saint-Exupéry. To this effect, this essay will analyze some of Woods's notable translation choices in comparison with those of Saint-Exupéry's original text and Howard's later translation. In addition, the essay will consider the critical reception and continued popularity of Woods's translation and how its popularity in America has encouraged others to adapt Saint-Exupéry's story through various media forms.

To understand the significance of Woods's translation choices, a brief synopsis of *The Little Prince* is necessary. Saint-Exupéry's novella follows an unnamed male pilot (also serving as the narrator) whose plane has crashed in the middle of a desert. As the pilot fixes his plane, he meets the prince, a little boy who hails from a faraway asteroid named B-612. The prince relates to the pilot his experiences visiting seven planets and interacting with their often eccentric inhabitants. Through this discussion, the prince and the pilot gain insights into the novella's core themes while wrestling with the differing philosophies and values of children and adults.

Woods adds vivid language and poetic turns of phrase throughout her translation that accentuate the beauty and themes present in Saint-Exupéry's novella. One example can be seen when the prince interacts with a merchant who sells pills that remove the need to drink water. The merchant explains that he uses the pills to save fifty-three minutes a week that otherwise would be spent on what he views as an unproductive activity. After pondering what he would do with fifty-three extra minutes a week, the prince answers with the following line:

Saint-Exupéry: "je marcherais tout doucement vers une fontaine . . ." (68).

Literal translation: "I would walk slowly towards a fountain . . ."

Woods's translation: "I should walk at my leisure toward a spring of fresh water . . ."  
(74).

Howard's translation: "I'd walk very slowly toward a water fountain . . ." (66).

Woods's translation stands out for how it sophisticates an activity portrayed in the original French text as simplistic and mundane. Instead of using "slowly" to describe the pace of the Prince's march, Woods chooses the more poetic-sounding and thoughtful phrase "at my leisure." This term better emphasizes the contrast between the philosophies of the adult merchant, who denies the simple pleasures of life in search of more time, and the young prince, who values the little joys in the ordinary. Whereas Saint-Exupéry and Howard's version of the prince dryly replies that he would "slowly" march toward water, Woods's prince relishes the idea of taking his time to seek out a water source. The water source is also a standout element from Woods's translation, which turns Saint-Exupéry's simple "fountain" into the more striking imagery of "a spring of fresh water." Such language elevates the childlike imagination of the prince and creates even greater texture and fantasy for the universe in which Saint-Exupéry's tale unfolds.

Another example of creative wording from Woods comes from her use of old-fashioned language, even for her time. Of particular interest is how Woods translates the French word "buveur," which means "drinker."

Saint-Exupéry: "La planète suivante était habitée par un buveur" (35).

Literal translation: "The next planet was inhabited by a drinker."

Woods's translation: "The next planet was inhabited by a tippler" (42).

Howard's translation: "The next planet was inhabited by a drunkard" (34).

While seemingly innocuous, Woods's translation of the French word for "drinker" as "tippler" rather than Howard's more literal term "drunkard" has some interesting effects. In her article "The Matter of Forking Consequences: Translating Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince*," translator Yu-Yun Hsieh explains that "'tippler' had been the slang for drinkers in the late nineteenth

century” and was over forty years removed from common use by the 1940s. Hsieh states that Woods likely mixes in noncontemporary terms, such as “tippler,” to shroud or deemphasize the period in which the story takes place. In doing so, Woods continues to employ more sophisticated-sounding language, in this case to the effect of unbinding the story from any particular time or place and further immersing readers in a new and interesting world.

Arguably, the most important example of Woods’s stylistic choices is found in her translation of the French phrase “choses sérieuses,” which most literally translates to “serious things” in English.

Saint-Exupéry: “Je m’occupe, moi, de choses sérieuses!” (20).

Literal translation: “I am busy with serious things!”

Woods’s translation: “I am very busy with matters of consequence!” (26).

Howard’s translation: “I’m busy here with something serious!” (20).

This phrase appears multiple times throughout Saint-Exupéry’s novella and refers to various concerns and preoccupations of the adult characters who interact with the prince during his travels. According to James Higgins in his book *The Little Prince: A Reverie of Substance*, Saint-Exupéry wrote his novella against the backdrop of the serious ongoing world war raging in Europe, a point of great pain for the French author. Higgins states that during this time of worldwide strife, Saint-Exupéry reflects a “concern for the human spirit” through *The Little Prince* by directing readers “to turn inward, not outward” regarding responsibilities and circumstances within their control (8). Hsieh claims that Woods’s translation of “serious things” as “matters of consequence” accentuates this sentiment for Americans, who were engrossed in the US effort in the Eastern theater of the global conflict and would soon enter the European theater. In this way, Hsieh argues that Woods’s translation allowed *The Little Prince* to “fulfill

its therapeutic mission” for American children and adults during a time of great uncertainty and fear. Rather than focusing on the seriousness of events outside readers’ control, Woods’s “matters of consequence” turns readers’ contemplation to the responsibilities and preoccupations in their personal lives that are within their abilities to influence.

Woods’s distinct poetic style and more liberal approach to translating *The Little Prince* have seemingly endeared her to American readers even after other translators have been more faithful to the original and simplistic text of Saint-Exupéry’s original work. This affection for Woods’s translation is showcased in the responses of American literary critics and book reviewers after Howard’s translation was released in 2000. In his article “A Charmless New Version of ‘Prince,’” literary critic David Kipen—who eventually became director of literature at the National Endowment for the Arts—strongly declares that “*The Little Prince* is a masterpiece inseparable from Katherine Woods’ matchless original translation.” In her article for Brigham Young University’s *Children’s Book and Media Review* journal, book reviewer Liz Kazandzhy opines that Howard’s translation of *The Little Prince* fails to “capture the meaning, magic, or poetry” of Woods’s and deems his rendition as “less than satisfying.” Even reviewers who appreciate Howard’s more straightforward and literal translation recognize the value of Woods’s rendition. In her article “Children’s Literature after Fifty-Seven Years, the ‘Prince’ Redux,” children’s book reviewer Liz Rosenberg praises Howard’s translation for comparing “remarkably well” with—although not quite exceeding—“the genius of Woods’s first translation.”

In addition to literary critics and book reviewers, many American readers also support Woods’s translation by writing blog posts and leaving reviews on e-commerce sites that sell her translation. David Lahti, writing on the blog *Reflections on Great Literature*, praises Woods’s translation for how it “evokes classic English fairy tales” through its more poetic style. Lahti also

slams Howard's translation for the "studious removal of color" in its language, which he asserts is more faithful to the "letter, though not spirit," of Saint-Exupéry's original text. Online listings for Woods's translation of *The Little Prince* contain passionate customer reviews that specifically mention her work. One customer review on *Amazon* states that Woods's translation is "the only one that does justice" to the novella and warns other users against buying Howard's translation, claiming that its language "lacks beauty" and "purges meaning" found in Woods's rendition (Jones). These responses from not only literary critics but also ordinary readers show how the combined creativity of Saint-Exupéry and Woods has become practically indivisible in the minds of many contemporary Americans.

The popularity of *The Little Prince*, which Woods's translation helped foster, has also left a lasting interest in adapting the novella to other creative forms within the United States. For example, in 2016, Netflix acquired the production and streaming rights for an animated adaptation of *The Little Prince* in the United States due to the company's confidence that the film would appeal to American audiences (Davis). The film's director and creator, Mark Osborne, was heavily inspired by Woods's translation and sought to "retain the quirkily poetic style" that many Americans prefer from Saint-Exupéry's story (Zimmer). According to the movie rating site *Rotten Tomatoes*, critics and general audiences have taken quite positively to the film, which boasts a critical score of ninety-two percent and an audience score of eighty-four percent ("*Little Prince*"). The novella was also adapted into an opera, composed by Rachel Portman, which premiered at the Houston Grand Opera in 2003 (Ward). The production continues to travel throughout the United States, including multiple showings at the Washington National Opera since its debut there in 2014 ("Washington National Opera"). These modern adaptations of the

novella and their success among American audiences further show the continuing impact of Saint-Exupéry's novella—as translated by Woods—on American media.

As the analysis of the text and review of the critical response demonstrate, Woods elevates not only the story but also herself from merely a translator to perhaps even a cocreator of *The Little Prince* in the minds of many American readers. Woods's poeticism, vivid imagery, and use of archaic language draw many readers into the fantastical universe of the novella and accentuate the key themes and values that Saint-Exupéry wished to convey. While Saint-Exupéry is rightfully lauded for producing this inspired and heartwarming tale, Woods no doubt shares in his accomplishment through her labors to shape the tale for American readers.

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