


Elena Fortún in Children's Literature. A state of the art

Elena Fortún en la Literatura Infantil y Juvenil. Un estado de la cuestión

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Abstract

This work develops a state of the art on Elena Fortún's work from the sixties to the present. In the first place, studies aimed at the analysis of Fortún's discourse are approached, from the characterization of the infantile characters to the deepening of Celia's language. Secondly, the works dedicated to the work of Encarnación Aragonés are examined from a gender perspective, either from the construction of the literary figure of Fortún in relation to other personalities of the time, either from her vision of women and of her own feminine identity. In third place, the current state of research on this writer is located and future lines of research are presented to contribute to filling the bibliographic gap that surrounds Fortún's presence in the literary education of the XXI century.

Keywords: Elena Fortún (1886-1952); children's literature; children's narrative; Spanish literature; literary education

Resumen

En este trabajo se desarrolla un estado de la cuestión sobre la obra de Elena Fortún (pseudónimo de Encarnación Aragonés) desde los años sesenta hasta la actualidad. En primer lugar, se abordan los estudios destinados al análisis del discurso fortuniano, desde la caracterización de los personajes infantiles hasta la profundización en la lengua de Celia. En segundo lugar, se examinan los trabajos dedicados a la obra de Encarnación Aragonés desde una perspectiva de género, ya sea desde la construcción de la figura literaria de Fortún en relación con otras personalidades de la época, ya sea desde su visión de la mujer y de su propia identidad femenina. En tercer lugar, se sitúa el estado actual en el que se encuentra la investigación en torno a esta escritora y se presentan las líneas de investigación futuras, en aras de contribuir a llenar el vacío bibliográfico que rodea la presencia de Fortún en la educación literaria del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: Elena Fortún (1886-1952); literatura infantil; narrativa infantil; literatura española; educación literaria



Elena Fortún in Children's and Young Adult Literature

Interest in the work of Elena Fortún (pseudonym of Encarnación Aragoneses) has been growing since the early years of the 20th century. Prior studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s are joined by post-modern perspectives that consolidate the place of Aragoneses' narrative in children's and young adult literature. Therefore, it is now necessary to bring together the most relevant works in a state of the art that will help to organise the thinking that has determined Fortún's consolidation in children's literary historiography, in order to make it easier for mediators to understand her corpus and put it into practice in class nowadays.

The aim of this study will therefore be to analyse the existing bibliography on the figure and work of Encarna Aragoneses. It is organised in two large sections: the first one is diachronic and the second one is synchronic, in order to explain Elena Fortún's place in 20th century children's and young adult literature. The first section is made up of studies that deal with the analysis of the author's discourse and the compilation of her texts carried out by different researchers. The second section, articulated through the gender perspective and the analysis of Aragoneses' work within the theoretical framework of the construction of identities, is based on the latest studies published and focuses on the current state of research on the life and work of the author of *Celia*.

Remarks on the analysis of Elena Fortún's work in the field of children's literature from a chronological perspective

Elena Fortún's discourse analysis

The *terminus a quo* established to evaluate the presence of Elena Fortún in children's literary historiography is the work of Bravo Villasante (1979 and 1983). In the first text, Bravo includes some stories from the *Celia* series: *Los Reyes Magos (Celia, lo que dice)*, *Celia, colegiala* and *La gran ceremonia (Celia y sus amigos)*, chapter VII of *Celia en el mundo* and pictures I and II of her work *El milagro de San Nicolás*. The reasons for this selection are given in her *Historia de la literatura infantil española* (1979) and in an article published in 1958, the text of which would be included in the subsequent monograph. Given the importance of her work as one of the main driving forces behind the canonisation of children's literature in the 20th century, it is necessary to highlight that Elena Fortún's place is due not only to her undisputed success in the publishing market but to her having made *Celia* one of the favourite characters of readers above all, as they ultimately brought her to life over several decades.

Therefore, Bravo-Villasante (1958) defines the texts of Bartolozzi and Elena Fortún as milestones of what he calls the "new concept of children's story" (pp. 583-590). This study, published at the end of the 1950s, briefly summarises the value of Encarna Aragoneses' work in the general framework of children's literature, since it fervently defends the originality of *Celia's* discourse as a character for children who narrates from a child's point of view, distancing herself from "those cheesy children of the nineteenth century, made in the image of their pedagogical preceptors" (Bravo-Villasante, 1958, p. 588). The main character is a mere indoctrinating tool

for readers in the first place, but it subsequently becomes an independent being with critical capacity, which also favours the development of a spontaneous discourse whose sense of humour is pleasing to both young and adult readers.

However, it was not until the 1980s that the origin of the current revaluation of Elena Fortún's work can be found. We are referring to the tribute coordinated by Bravo-Villasante, Field, García and García Padrino, in 1986, on the occasion of the centenary of the author's birth. The biographical aspects, now broadened by other researchers (Fraga-Fernández-Cuevas, Capdevila-Argüelles & Melián-Pérez) were taken up by Bravo-Villasante, while the analysis of her literary discourse was entrusted to García-Padrino. On the other hand, García (Bravo Villasante et al., 1986) summarised the bibliographical problems surrounding her work and Field's contribution was transcendental in illuminating the shadow that hung over Aragonese's life during her exile in Argentina.

The work of García Padrino (2000) is especially interesting for our study, since it is the only one that deals with the analysis of Fortún's literary discourse on children's literature in its entirety, apart from other biographical perspectives. By paying attention to Celia's language and the literary universe around her, as well as to the main structures that enrich her work, she establishes the foundations on which any scholar should base their work, both from a philological and literary education point of view. However, it needs to be complemented by other studies that will unravel - in greater detail - the narrative intricacies that weave together all the elements of the series, as this is the starting point for bringing these works to 21st century readers.

Since this tribute, the bibliography on the work of Elena Fortún has mostly focused on an analysis of her novels as a transcription of the construction of the author's identity, either from a gender perspective or from her relationship with other female writers of the first half of the twentieth century. However, there is still a current of studies which has tackled the analysis of Fortún's discourse with a certain continuity, yet without offering a detailed vision of her texts. However, it should be noted that the resurgence of Celia's character has been effectively contributed to by the development of activities of an informative nature. The importance of the *première* of the series *Celia* by José Luis Borau for TVE in 1993, promoted by Carmen Martín Gaité (who also gave a series of lectures on Elena Fortún at the Fundación Juan March in Madrid) is well known, but we should not forget the documentary by Ana Vega Toscano for RNE in 2016, entitled *¿Quién fue Elena Fortún, la autora de Celia?*, as well as the recent series Sendero Fortún, performed by the Centro Dramático Nacional with text by María Folguera (February-March 2020). In addition to the foregoing, four novels have been reissued by Alianza in the last decade - *Celia, lo que dice* (2014 and 2020), *Celia en el colegio* (2017 and 2020), *Celia en el mundo* (2018) and *Celia y sus amigos* (2016) - which show the bibliographical consolidation of the character and the transcendence of the figure of the author in literary dissemination events.

Her narrative, the genre in which Elena Fortún was most fluent (or most successful in publishing), was vindicated at the end of the 1990s by Escobar-Bonilla (1997), a revaluation that continued from the turn of the 21st century (Cerrillo, 2000; Sotomayor, 2008 & Fernández-Cuevas, 2012). Escobar-Bonilla (1997) places Elena Fortún's work in the period of height in literature known as the "Silver Age", completing the adult corpus with texts aimed at children, the

literary value of which is hardly discussed today. However, we believe the division of Fortún's work into two large sections is particularly interesting, as might be expected, by the wall erected by the Spanish Civil War. Escobar-Bonilla (1997) rightly focuses on the first period, addressing issues such as the recurrence of characters, the lightness of the plot, the role of the prologues and the orality of the different narratives, all of them headed by an "extradiegetic narrator who disappears quickly" (p. 9). Finally, she briefly points out the presence of some narrative formulas that enrich the action, such as transtextuality or metafiction; issues that, until then, had been ignored by critics.

On the other hand, Cerrillo (2000) also took a generalist look at *Celia*'s discourse without adding new elements of analysis to those offered by García-Padrino (2000) or by Escobar-Bonilla (1997) but manages to revive the reading of Celia by being published in a widely distributed journal of LIJ in Spanish, *CLIJ (CLIJ Cuadernos de Literatura Infantil y Juvenil)*. Thus, he highlighted the value Fortún gave to the flow of children's logic as the main element of her work, in a *bildungsroman* that accepts the reader's complicit gaze and ear. He also points out the main lines of analysis of the discourse of the *Celia* series as a portrait of the educated bourgeoisie of Madrid, which (partially) embodies educational ideas linked to the Institución Libre de Enseñanza and the Lyceum Club (Cerrillo, 2000, p. 34). This is then a summary of what is usually introduced in the articles published on Fortún's work nowadays, but again from a generalist perspective that does not really contribute to consolidating the knowledge of the narrative and discursive reasons that made her work famous for almost half a century.

In this sense, the only study that offers a specific perspective on the narrative sources from which Fortún's creation draws was published by Fraga-Fernández-Cuevas (2012), years after the publication of a work by García-Padrino (2005) that compiled the children's books that were influenced by *Don Quixote*. Therefore, Fraga Fernández-Cuevas includes the *Celia* series and subsequent publications in this list of Quixotic readings for children; motivated - above all - by the mastery of the imagination that determines Celia's actions and the influences of the stories she had previously read. In this work, the starting point seems to us to be particularly appropriate, as it takes up the writings that Fortún published in the press about the criteria for selecting children's works and the importance of encouraging reading; issues that have not been sufficiently addressed to corroborate their belonging to the Spanish children's literary heritage from the perspective of literary education. Other parallels between *Don Quixote* and *Celia* - the episodic nature of the novels, the predominance of dialogue which allows the characters to express themselves, the dual perspective of everyday life, etc. - seem less evident to us as evidence of direct filiation, although their influence as part of the modern and contemporary Spanish imaginary is undeniable.

As a complementary vision to the prominence that Escobar-Bonilla (1997) gives to Celia's first phase, to the general vision of Cerrillo (2000) and to the quixotic analysis of Fraga-Fernández-Cuevas (2012), we are referring to Uría-Ríos's study (2000), aimed at one of Elena Fortún's most complex works from the editorial point of view: *Celia en la revolución*; an astonishing wartime document narrated by a teenage Celia. Uría-Ríos (2000) focuses on the ideological component of the novel, through a linear analysis of the narrative and the political identification conveyed by the girl's words. Sotomayor (2008) approaches the work from a structural perspective,

following the socio-historical vision that Fortún offers through the inner transformation of the child character. The focus of analysis thus does not vary much between the two researchers.

Years later, Belmonte-Serrano (2013) returned to this novel with the intention of highlighting the objectivity of the text as a war document, despite the evident identification of Celia's thoughts with those of Elena Fortún. He also emphasised the role of humour in the play as an antidote to "mitigate those other grisly scenes that abound" (p. 127). In a geocritical vein, Fraga-Fernández-Cuevas (2020) published a cartographic study of the Madrid of *Celia en la revolución* on the website of the Library of the Autonomous Community of Madrid, which can be accessed from its website.

Apart from this novel, yet linked to the ideological consequences of the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent dictatorship, Craig (2000) analysed Franco's censorship in both Fortún's and Borita Casas's novels, as opposed to the prototype of the national-Catholic woman. She focused his study on *Celia, institutriz en América* (withdrawn in 1945 by the National Propaganda Delegation), *Celia en el colegio* (banned in 1946 and 1950) and on the textual deletions of *Celia, lo que dice*; *Celia, madrecita* y *Celia y sus amigos* in 1946.

As a complement to these works, we should highlight the studies entirely devoted to Elena Fortún's theatre, a genre in which the author contributed texts of great literary value, even though it has been absorbed by the fame of Celia and her successors. We are referring to those published by Nieva de la Paz (1993) and Molina-Angulo and Selfa-Sastre (2019). In the first one, Nieva de la Paz (1993) underlines the importance of the children's texts created by female writers in the first third of the 20th century, with pedagogical criteria falling within a liberal, feminist ideology. We will not focus on the detail with which she describes the theatrical productions of the three authors; we are interested in underlining the need to study Fortún's work from its educational principles above all. The second work (Molina-Angulo & Selfa-Sastre, 2019) delves deeper into this question and reevaluates Fortún's theatre against the moralising zeal of other earlier and contemporary plays.

Finally, and to close this section of studies on Elena Fortún's work from the perspective of discourse analysis, we will focus on a current which, within the general bibliographical framework, is an exception to the literary perspective: the linguistic analysis of Celia's speech as a genuine example of children's language.

There are three works that fall within this last trend. Firstly, the study by García-Ruiz (1987), who uses *Celia* series to analyse the difficulties in the acquisition of the linguistic norm and, secondly, the research by De la Fuente-González (1987), also on the linguistic norm linked to the comicality in *Celia*, as an example of the language of an eight-year-old child. Five years later, this trend continued, which petered out as the decade progressed: De Hoyos Rodríguez (1992) addressed the use of future forms in Celia's speech and Ezpeleta-Aguilar (2019) analysed the popular lyric transcribed in *Celia en el colegio*, within the corpus of girls' school stories.

Encarnación Aragoneses' life experience: construction of her identity, sociological perspectives and gender studies.

This second section of works dedicated to the study of Elena Fortún's narrative is made up of research dedicated to analysing her biobibliography from a sociological or gender perspective. Encarna Aragoneses' life has aroused great interest, both because of her homosexuality and because she belonged to the circle of intellectual women of the inter-war period, today revalued as milestones of Spanish feminist thought. Although this perspective has been developed to a greater extent in recent studies - and will therefore be the cornerstone of the following section - we find it appropriate to focus on the origins of current studies, which are based on the first biographies and her letters as the main sources of research.

Therefore, the main document is Dorao-Orduña's biography (1999), a work in which she gathers all the data collected through her contact with the Gorbea-Aragoneses family: early years, childhood in Segovia and moves to Santander and Madrid, death of her son Bolín and trip to the Canary Islands; return to the capital in the years before the war and Celia's arrival; exile, trip to the USA, return to Madrid, etc. Four years later, Dorao-Orduña (2003) took up this biography again in an article devoted to Fortún's vision of herself as a dreamer and storyteller, in the form of a biographical summary that did not add to the previous ones.

Prior to the biography, Dorao-Orduña (1987, 1990) had already published two studies: an analysis of the biographical parallels between Edith Nesbit and Elena Fortún and a study on the biographical component in the creation of the character of Celia. From the first of them (Dorao-Orduña, 1987), it is worth highlighting the reflection on the educational thinking of both writers, especially in the description of the schools of the time and the type of education given. However, we do not share Dorao-Orduña's view that the image of Celia's boarding school of *Celia, en el colegio* is positive; criticism is clear in more than one story and the tone of melancholy, feelings of abandonment and sadness is constantly shown by Celia, although it is sometimes overshadowed by the girl's spontaneity and imagination.

After the publication of Dorao-Orduña's biography, gender studies on the work of Elena Fortún emerged, and they could be grouped into two large blocks: those that analyse the *bildungsroman* constructed by Celia's novels and those that focus on Aragoneses's participation in feminist thought in the first half of the 20th century. In the first section, the works dedicated to the reflection on the independence of women through the different girls of the series stand out (Maharg-Bravo & Bravo, 2003; Caamaño-Alegre, 2007) and, on the other hand, those that focus on the duality Celia/Fortún and the interrelation between character and creator (Capdevila-Argüelles, 2005). According to this author, Fortún used the character of Celia to explore:

The creative subjectivity of women and other feminist issues that were personally important to her, such as the problematic role of motherhood in a society that was beginning to actively discuss the emancipation of women and the importance of education and knowledge as a means of regenerating the nation and the individual (2005, p. 263).

In the second large section on literature aforementioned, which constitutes the bulk of the corpus of Fortún studies with feminist approaches, fiction is used solely as a framework and as a biographical complement to the shared social experiences around the Lyceum Club. For

this reason, comparative analyses of Fortún's life with those of other female writers, such as Carmen Baroja and Zenobia Camprubí (Melián-Pérez, 2005), have emerged. They deal with her early awareness of gender injustice, her feeling of family uprooting, her incomprehension of the resignation of her contemporaries, her precocious love of study and culture, her later perception of intellectual frustration and the value of friendship as the privileged pivot around which her initiatives would revolve. However, this study does not contribute much to the biographical data already known, but rather offers a historiographical location of the author, which is debatable from a literary point of view.

On the other hand, Fraga-Fernández-Cuevas (2013a) offers data and a more novel perspective in her book dedicated to Fortún's presence in the press, a vital aspect that deserved a detailed analysis, both for the evolution of her work and for the pedagogical and social ideology that can be inferred from these writings (and others).

The essential line that closes the biographical studies on Elena Fortún are those dedicated to illuminating the period of her American exile, of which there was hardly any data.¹ Again, Fraga-Fernández-Cuevas (2013b) and Capdevila-Argüelles (2015) organise the vicissitudes surrounding Encarna Aragonese's publications in America between 1948 and 1951. The research by Fraga Fernández-Cuevas (2013b) is particularly interesting, as it combines the available biographical information with the analysis of Fortún's epistolary collection of those years, during the editions of *Celia se casa*, *Celia, institutriz en América* and *El cuaderno de Celia*. On the other hand, Capdevila-Argüelles (2015) compiles Elena Fortún's articles in the Tenerife Republican newspaper *La Prensa*; such series are entitled "Cartas a una mujer tinerfeña" and "El trabajo de la mujer".

As a complement, although of an informative nature, it is necessary to add the second episode of the documentary called *Las Sinsombrero. Ocultas e impecables* for RTVE, directed by Tània Balló, Manuel Jiménez Núñez and Serrana Torres, where the figure of Elena Fortún, among other intellectuals and artists of that generation, is retrieved.

New readers, new readings. Current position on Elena Fortún's work

The research by Fraga-Fernández-Cuevas and Capdevila-Argüelles, who began working together in 2015, precisely allowed the revaluation of the figure of Encarna Aragonese in recent years, especially from the perspective of the construction of her personal and literary identity. That year, they published a compilation volume of texts by Fortún and Matilde Ras under the title *El camino es nuestro*, as representative figures of Spanish feminist thought in the 20th century. In fact, the text starts with a series of handwritten notes that seem to reveal the gender ambiguity of the author since her birth, and then leads to the compilation and classification of texts in the press in terms of gender (Capdevila-Argüelles & Fraga-Fernández-Cuevas, 2015). Thus, they rescue "Cartas a una mujer tinerfeña" - in our opinion, essential for understanding Fortún's ideas that led her to create *Celia* series and other works - and also recover some previously unpublished texts (stories published in the magazine *Crónica* in the 1930s, other *Celia* stories, etc.).

As can be seen, this monograph represents a consolidation of the line of analysis of Elena Fortún's work as a paradigm of the construction of a hidden identity, which had begun at the beginning of the twentieth century and will continue to the present day. It is no longer just a question of highlighting the author's feminist thinking, but of making her homosexuality visible above all, as demonstrated in *Oculto Sendero*, through her letters, her biography and certain passages of *Celia* as the main objects of study.

Thus, the continuation of the joint work begun in *El camino es nuestro* culminated in 2016 with the publication of the Fortún's novel *Oculto sendero*, edited by both of them and widely reviewed in the press thanks, among other reasons, to the publicity impact of its cover. The synthesis with which Renacimiento publishers promote the novel seems to be decisive to us, since it unequivocally assumes Elena Fortún's homosexuality, confessed in a *bildungsroman* extensively developed in the series *Celia*. Naturally, this implies that the girl's adventures are again read in terms of gender, looking for glimpses of the author's sexual identity.

Thus, these two publications consolidated the feminist/identitarian line of research on Elena Fortún's work, arousing the interest of other scholars (De la Fuente, 2015; Calceglia, 2018; De Pablos, 2018) who insisted on making Aragonese's hidden identity visible.

As a second line of research, embedded in the reading of Elena Fortún's life and work from a gender perspective, studies focused on her relationship with other female writers of the time, who were influential figures in Spanish feminism in the first half of the twentieth century. Some of these works, such as the one by Peláez-Albendea (2018), use the analysis of her letters started in prior articles as a source; in all other cases, Fortún is placed in the circle formed around the Institución Libre de Enseñanza and the Republican ideology.

The first of these (Álvarez, 2015) was published in the same year as *El camino es nuestro*, but in this case it is a comparative study of Fortún's life with that of María Teresa León, even if it is difficult to find a common thread in their life experiences. Álvarez uses the awarding of the first Nobel Prize for literature to the writer Selma Lagerlöf in 1909 as a starting point to describe Elena Fortún as part of the so-called Generation of 1914. However, it does not contribute any unknown facts or a new reading of her life or work, although it does maintain the reviving spirit of Elena Fortún's fame by equating it with that of another writer whose critical fortune has been greater.

Melián-Pérez (2018) deals in greater depth with Aragonese's time at the library studies of the Residencia de Señoritas, in the six years immediately prior to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. She thus remembers her relationship with María de Maeztu and, above all, the importance of the reflection on children's education and the recovery of the Spanish folk heritage that was promoted there. In our opinion, it constitutes an essential axis around which a large part of the creation of the series was later articulated.

Fortún's natural ability as a narrator of children's stories is well known, and it seems certain that this practice gave her a new impulse in the configuration of the character that would accompany her throughout her career, as from these experiences she was able to extract not only part of *Celia*'s voice, but also children's reading responses to other children's texts. Years later, during her exile in Buenos Aires, Fortún wrote again, for the *Crónica* magazine

this time, a series of articles related to education and children's libraries, which led to a draft of *Celia, bibliotecaria*, which was never published (Melián-Pérez, 2018). We believe these data are decisive in explaining not only Celia's creative process, but also her conception of childhood and of children's literature in general. We believe these articles should constitute the starting point for the educational recovery of Elena Fortún's work, as they anticipate the modernity, today disregarded, of many of her narrative approaches.

Recently, and again in connection with the Biblioteca de Señoritas and the Lyceum Club, the relationship of patronage between María Martínez Sierra and Elena Fortún has been revived. As Sánchez-Díaz (2018) makes clear, Lejárraga was the driving force behind Fortún's literary career (although this issue had been extensively documented by mainstream researchers of her work and life); however, her study focuses on the parallels between *Oculto sendero* and *Sortilegio*, works in which both women documented their sexual inclination. This work, which rests on six pillars - characterisation of the characters, lexical issues referring to homosexuality, works as an example of *queer bildungsroman*, transgression of sexual roles and suicide as the outcome of the life conflict - overlooks a more important aspect, in our opinion, of the relationship between these two writers: the narrative affiliation established between *Short Stories. Lecturas recreativas para niños* signed by María Lejárraga and Elena Fortún's stories, published three decades apart. It is not the aim of this research, but we consider it necessary to address this question in order to highlight Aragonese innovation within the framework of children's storytelling production at the time.

Finally, in 2016 the Banco Santander Foundation published the letters of Carmen Laforet and Elena Fortún, with forewords by Cristina and Silvia Cerezales, Laforet's daughters, and Capdevila-Argüelles. They reveal Laforet's admiration for the creator of *Celia* in the last years of her life - from 1945, when *Nada* was published, to 1952, the year of Elena Fortún's death. Peláez-Albendea (2018) reviewed this collection of 46 letters, focusing on Carmen Laforet's new spirituality above all. This spirituality is linked to the rapprochement with religion that Fortún had experienced during her years in Argentina.

Consequently, in recent decades the recovery of Elena Fortún's work has been consolidated from a broad perspective, with the studies of the sixties of the last century as a starting point. The analysis of the discourse of her work, especially the first series of *Celia*, was later joined by a very marked line of biobibliographical genre studies, which continues today. In the first case, the study of Celia's language still prevails, leaving a bibliographical void in the detailed analysis of the narrative formulas used in her novels. In the second case, the author's identity discourse seems to be consolidated, emerging from her personal writings and editorial publications.

Therefore, it is now time to investigate Elena Fortún's work from the perspective of the didactics of literature, that is to say, of the importance of the possibilities that it provides in today's classroom and of the reading responses that children of the 21st century would offer, in order to determine its relevance and then discuss the pertinence of its insertion in the canon of contemporary Spanish children's classics.

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Notes

- i With the exception of those offered by Field as the main witness of those years, of which the publication in the Elena Fortún Library of her epistolary with Aragonese (Capdevila-Argüelles, 2020) is a special example.