

**UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA**

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA



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DE SALAMANCA**

CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL

TESIS DOCTORAL

CHALLENGING GENDER ROLES IN AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND  
PREJUDICE* AND ALCOTT'S *LITTLE WOMEN* AND THEIR  
RECEPTION. A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Vº Bº de la Directora

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen is considered one of the most important writers in the history of literature. Since the publication of her first novel in 1811, her fame has grown and expanded worldwide. From the small country village of Steventon in Hampshire to the last film or television adaptations of her works, Austen has become a world phenomenon. It is impossible to find someone who has not heard of Jane Austen either because of her novels or one of the many adaptations of her works to the big and small screen. For her part, Louisa May Alcott also became a well-known writer thanks to her *Little Women* trilogy; yet, she was never as popular as Jane Austen, especially in academia.

Despite these apparent differences, it is possible to draw parallelisms between these authors' circumstances, reception and recent rise to fame within popular culture. Even if separated by the Atlantic Ocean and half a century, as women writers they faced similar difficulties and addressed recurrent feminocentric experiences, while their works were praised and criticised on almost equal grounds. However, inquiry has evinced that there are no comprehensive comparative studies which approach these similarities. In order to fill this void, the present thesis has been conceived with the following aims: first, to expose how their best-known works display similar concerns regarding women and how over time some advancements in their rights are perceived; secondly, to explore how their sex and the genres they chose have defined their reception throughout time, proving a certain bias in reviewers and readers; and, finally, to analyse the reasons for the current popularity, and how new adaptations similarly oversimplify their works.

The structure of the present thesis will therefore respond to the aforementioned considerations and will be divided into three parts. In the first place, to understand the importance of the novels, the novelists and the messages of their works, four fields of study will be used: comparative literature, gender studies and reception and adaptation theories, all of which will be briefly addressed in the theoretical introduction. Moreover, the historical frame of the authors and their works will be provided, in order to understand the themes addressed by their texts in their original context. After this, a comparative study of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women* addressing the aforesaid similarities will be performed. In order to do so, the fields of comparative literature and

gender studies will be used to analyse the importance of these novels as part of what could be considered a female literary tradition, as opposed to the masculine tradition that dominated the literary panorama for centuries, and to highlight the demands for female rights and the denunciation of inequality between the sexes in the novels. For doing this, it is necessary to study women's situation in the Regency period and nineteenth-century America and to investigate the thematic and gender-related aspects of the novels to show the similarity between them regardless of their belonging to different times, countries and societies.

In this sense, it will be highlighted how both, Austen and Alcott, choose female characters as the heroines of their works. The stories focus on their lives and denounce the unequal situation existing in the nineteenth century between men and women. To do this, the reader is presented with a set of circumstances where it is easy to see the difficulties of women's lives in that period due to their lack of freedom and the constraining social norms they were expected to fulfil. However, these female characters do not follow the role models of women's behaviour promoted in the nineteenth century. They are strong and independent, they speak their mind, and they fight for what they consider to be right.

Scholars such as Gilbert and Gubar have rejected the validity of works like *Pride and Prejudice* or *Little Women* due to the 'happily ever after' ending they portray, as the heroines of the novels finally fall in love with the male character and conclude the narrative marrying them in the most traditional way. Nevertheless, others have been capable of seeing beyond this fact and have stressed the importance of the social denunciation of women's situation, the strength of the female characters, the demand for equality and the acceptance of a marriage between equals, which is the kind of union both writers promote in their works.

Apart from this, the female characters of their novels are not the only ones who suffer a transformation. The male characters presented and promoted in their works are not the prototype of the strong and dominant figure of the nineteenth century. The standards of masculinity, though mostly maintained, are altered to create a new model of manliness that promotes reason and equality above violence and authoritarianism. With these new models of masculinity and femininity, men and women are able to engage

in conversation as equals and, maybe through this, achieve changes.

In the final part, the object of study will change and the reader, rather than the writers, will be examined. In this section, the main reasons for the success of the novels in the nineteenth century and the twenty-first century will be identified. Moreover, the last adaptation of Austen and Alcott's works to the cinema and television will be studied to determine the contemporary success of the novels and how they have changed in order to fulfill the expectations of modern audiences. The study of the adaptations will not only answer to the reason why the novels and authors are still influential nowadays, but also to why these adaptations are not faithful reproductions of the original novels, a fact related to the audience, and how they provide *canonical* and *non-canonical* readings of texts that have been studied for more than a century.

Therefore, in this section, the similarity between the writers will be seen to include their reception, as both authors were considered 'light writers,' while their drawing of characters and realism were the most highlighted characteristics of their novels in the nineteenth century. Moreover, both became the "Aunt" of several generations, "Aunt Jane" and "Aunt Jo," and were exalted for the serene and placid stories they wrote. The situation changed thanks to the apparition of new fields of study such as feminist criticism, which provided a re-reading of their works and highlighted the revolutionary spirit of the novels and the novelist. With this new idea in mind and the influence of feminism in other fields of study, the reception of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women* changed. Moreover, the new adaptations of the novels to cinema and television echoed the new tendency of women's studies. Some scenes and characters were altered to respond to a more feminist vision of the works; however, at the same time, the stories were romanticised to fulfil the expectations of the audiences of the new century, providing a coeval canonical and non-canonical reading of the novels.

Hence, the present study will contend that a comparative study of Austen and Alcott illuminates the stance of women writers in the nineteenth century, highlighting the resilience of certain stereotypes, stigmas or challenges. At the same time, it will vindicate the value of these authors in the history of literature, together with their role as popular icons.



## 7. CONCLUSION

After analysing and studying the life, novels, reception and adaptations of the authors, it can be seen that there is a clear parallelism between them. Concerning their historical context, Austen and Alcott lived in revolutionary and tumultuous eras. Austen's epoch was marked by important historical events such as the Napoleonic Wars and, similarly, Alcott witnessed and even took part in the American Civil War with her work as a nurse. Additionally, both novelists lived in a time marked by strong inequalities between the sexes. While men enjoyed freedom and were able to pursue a profession, women were restricted to the domestic sphere, where they were expected to fulfil their roles as wives and mothers.

Moreover, despite the restriction women suffered in several aspects of their lives, Austen and Alcott were an example of women whose education was wisely cared for. While women in Austen's time were not educated beyond basic reading, writing and the accomplishments, she was instructed by her father and brothers and had access to an extensive library, which she could freely use. In similar terms, Alcott's education was also conducted by her father and mother and, like Austen, she was encouraged to read and learn about the world without restrictions.

The restrictive situation of women in both historical periods was the main agenda behind these authors' works. It is evident that, during Austen's time, feminism, as it is known today, did not exist; however, Austen was well aware of the limitations imposed on women and the strong social pressure they were submitted to in order to fulfil their roles. Moreover, in spite of the few improvements in women's life between the Regency period and post-bellum America, Alcott's time continued to impose restrictions on women, something that made her become a proponent of the rights of women. As a result, though with some differences, Austen and Alcott propose changes in their novels that would guarantee the improvement of women's lives, such as better education for women or equality between the sexes.

This can be seen in the authors' most influential works, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women*. In these novels, Austen and Alcott challenge the traditional structure of the family by creating matriarchal environments where men are inefficient and women

dominate the narrative. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen makes use of irony to criticise the social expectations of women during the Regency period. She highlights the dangers of marrying for money, the importance of education and supports the idea of marriage based on equality, mutual love and respect. In similar terms, Alcott stresses the necessity of proper education for women and the importance of equality and respect in marriage; yet, unlike Austen, Alcott also defends the entrance of women in the work force and the importance of hard work to improve one's life. Moreover, both writers challenge the traditional feminine and masculine stereotypes and propose new models of womanhood and manhood. Concerning womanhood, the authors present a new type of heroine, one who is eager to challenge the social expectations of her time and whose main aim is self-knowledge and self-improvement. Similarly, the new model of masculinity is based on heroes whose personalities can also be changed and improved thanks to self-knowledge and whose relationships are based on companionship and equality rather than on power relations and money.

Moving on to the reception of the novels, both writers follow a similar pattern. Austen and Alcott were praised by their realism and characters, something that also granted them some criticism. The morality of their novels was also a point to highlight and the domesticity of their narrations made reviewers not see beyond the idyllic picture of family life and femininity they had supposedly created, leaving aside the most important points made by the authors about women's right to education and the necessity to reassess the role of women inside the family and in the public sphere. This, together with the fact that they never married, transformed both authors into 'aunts,' Aunt Jane and Aunt Jo, for several generations. Perhaps the most divergent point between them was the fact that Austen was soon claimed by academia, granting her a place in the canon of world literature. In the case of Alcott, she would have to wait for the second wave of feminism to be appreciated and studied, especially in relation to her long unknown and forgotten *penny dreadfuls*.

The continued acclamation of Austen and her novels in comparison to Alcott's is essential to explain the great contrast between them in terms of the number of contemporary adaptations. While Austen's works have all been rewritten for the big or the small screen on several occasions, only *Little Women* has had that privilege. Nevertheless, these adaptations include many changes and modifications to make them

more attractive to modern audiences. Adapters are aware of the fact that modern audiences are great consumers of heritage films. Consequently, these films try to create an idealised picture of the past and often fall within the genre of the so-called ‘rom-coms,’ or chick-flicks, where the narration revolves around the love stories. The resulting adaptation, despite the similarities with the original work, does not always coincide with the main ideas that the text tries to defend and, as a consequence, cannot be considered faithful adaptations regarding the authors’ relevant subtexts, as they provide a non-canonical reading of the novels and messages proposed by the authors.

Therefore, as has been proved, despite belonging to different countries and historical periods, both writers have similar claims and demands for the improvement of women’s lives, which reveals that the situation of women –and women writers– continued to be precarious for many years. Moreover, Austen and Alcott are part of a great tradition of women who, against the odds, were brave enough to make their voices heard and who fearlessly entered the literary world, a world that had been dominated by men, to denounce women’s situation and to propose changes to improve it. Similarly, novels like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women* have become a symbol in the fight for equality and, nowadays, they are still studied and appreciated by the audience, either by means of the written text or by one of their many adaptations.

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**9. APPENDIX**

**UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA**  
FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA  
DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA



**UNIVERSIDAD  
DE SALAMANCA**

CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL

TESIS DOCTORAL

DESAFIANDO LOS ROLES DE GÉNERO EN *ORGULLO Y PREJUICIO* DE AUSTEN Y *MUJERCITAS*  
DE ALCOTT Y SU RECEPCIÓN. UN ESTUDIO COMPARATIVO

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2019

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## 1. INTRODUCCIÓN

Jane Austen es considerada una de las escritoras más importantes de la historia de la literatura. Desde la publicación de su primera novela en 1811 hasta las últimas adaptaciones cinematográficas de sus obras, Austen se ha convertido en un fenómeno mundial. Es casi imposible encontrar a alguien que no haya oído hablar de Jane Austen ya sea por sus novelas o por una de las muchas adaptaciones de sus obras a la pequeña o gran pantalla. Por su parte, Louisa May Alcott también se convirtió en una escritora muy conocida gracias a su trilogía de *Mujercitas*; sin embargo, nunca fue tan popular como Jane Austen, especialmente en el mundo académico.

A pesar de las aparentes diferencias, es posible establecer paralelismos entre las circunstancias de las autoras, su recepción y su reciente ascenso a la fama dentro de la cultura popular. Aunque estas novelistas se encuentran separadas por el Océano Atlántico y más de medio siglo, como escritoras se enfrentaron a dificultades similares y abordaron experiencias feminocéntricas recurrentes, mientras que sus obras fueron elogiadas y criticadas casi por igual. Sin embargo, la investigación ha demostrado que no existen estudios comparativos exhaustivos que aborden estas similitudes. Para llenar este vacío, la presente tesis ha sido concebida con los siguientes objetivos: primero, exponer cómo sus trabajos más conocidos muestran preocupaciones similares con respecto a las mujeres y cómo a lo largo del tiempo se perciben algunos avances en sus derechos; en segundo lugar, explorar cómo su sexo y los géneros literarios que eligieron han definido su recepción a lo largo del tiempo, lo que demuestra ciertos prejuicios en críticos y lectores; y, finalmente, analizar las razones de la popularidad actual y cómo las nuevas adaptaciones simplifican de manera similar sus trabajos.

La estructura de esta tesis, por tanto, responderá a las consideraciones antes mencionadas y se dividirá en tres partes. En primer lugar, para comprender la importancia de las novelas, los novelistas y los mensajes de sus obras, se utilizarán cuatro campos de estudio: la literatura comparada, los estudios de género y las teorías de recepción y adaptación, las cuales se abordarán brevemente en la introducción teórica. Además, se proporcionará el marco histórico de las autoras y sus obras, a fin de comprender los temas abordados por sus textos en su contexto original. Después de esto, se realizará un estudio comparativo de *Orgullo y prejuicio* y *Mujercitas* que

abordará las similitudes antes mencionadas. Para ello, se utilizarán los campos de la literatura comparada y los estudios de género para analizar la importancia de estas novelas como parte de lo que podría considerarse una tradición literaria femenina, en oposición a la tradición masculina que dominó el panorama literario durante siglos, y resaltar las demandas por los derechos de las mujeres y la denuncia de la desigualdad entre los sexos en las novelas. Para esto, es necesario estudiar la situación de las mujeres en el período de la Regencia y en la América del siglo XIX e investigar los aspectos temáticos relacionados con el género de las novelas para mostrar la similitud entre ellas independientemente de su pertenencia a diferentes épocas, países y sociedades.

En este sentido, se destacará cómo ambas autoras, Austen y Alcott, eligen personajes femeninos como heroínas de sus obras. Las historias se centran en sus vidas y denuncian la desigual situación existente en el siglo XIX entre los sexos. Para hacer esto, le presenta al lector una serie de circunstancias en las que es fácil ver las dificultades de las mujeres en ese período debido a su falta de libertad y las normas sociales restrictivas que se esperaba que cumplieran. A pesar de ello, estos personajes no siguen los modelos de conducta de comportamiento femeninos promovidos en el siglo XIX. Son fuertes e independientes, dicen lo que piensan y luchan por lo que consideran correcto.

Por un lado, académicos como Gilbert y Gubar han rechazado la validez de obras como *Orgullo y prejuicio* o *Mujercitas* debido al final de “y vivieron felices para siempre” que retratan, ya que las heroínas finalmente se enamoran del personaje masculino y se casan, concluyéndose de la forma más tradicional. Por otro lado, otros han sido capaces de ver más allá de este hecho y han destacado la importancia de la denuncia social de la situación de las mujeres, la fortaleza de los personajes femeninos, la demanda de igualdad y la aceptación de un matrimonio entre iguales, que es el tipo de unión que ambas escritoras promocionan en sus obras.

Aparte de esto, los personajes femeninos de sus novelas no son los únicos que sufren una transformación. Los personajes masculinos presentados y promovidos en sus obras no se corresponden con el prototipo de hombre fuerte y dominante del siglo XIX. Los estándares de masculinidad, aunque en su mayoría se mantienen, se modifican para

crear un nuevo modelo de masculinidad que promueve la razón y la igualdad por encima de la violencia y el autoritarismo. Con estos nuevos modelos de masculinidad y feminidad, los hombres y mujeres pueden entablar conversaciones como iguales y, quizás a través de esto, lograr cambios.

En la parte final, el objeto de estudio cambiará y se examinará al lector, en lugar de a las escritoras. En esta sección, se identificarán las principales razones del éxito de las novelas en el siglo XIX y el siglo XXI. Además, se estudiarán las últimas adaptaciones cinematográficas y televisivas de *Orgullo y prejuicio* y *Mujercitas* para determinar el éxito contemporáneo de las novelas y cómo son alteradas para satisfacer las expectativas de la audiencia moderna. El estudio de las adaptaciones no solo responderá a la razón por la que las novelas y las autoras siguen siendo influyentes en la actualidad, sino también la razón por la que estas adaptaciones no son reproducciones fieles de las novelas originales, un hecho relacionado con el público.

Por tanto, en esta sección, se verá que la similitud entre las escritoras incluye su recepción, ya que ambas fueron consideradas “*light writers*,” mientras que sus personajes y realismo fueron las características más destacadas de sus novelas en el siglo XIX. Además, ambas se convirtieron en las “tías” de varias generaciones, la “tía Jane” (Austen) y la “tía Jo” (Alcott), y fueron exaltadas por las serenas y plácidas historias que escribieron. La situación cambió gracias a la aparición de nuevos campos de estudio, como la crítica feminista, que repasó sus obras y destacó el espíritu revolucionario de las novelas y las novelistas. Con esta nueva idea en mente y la influencia del feminismo en otros campos de estudio, la recepción de *Orgullo y prejuicio* y *Mujercitas* cambió. Además, las nuevas adaptaciones de las novelas al cine y la televisión se hicieron eco de la nueva tendencia de los estudios de género ya que algunas escenas y personajes fueron alterados para responder a una visión más feminista de las obras. Sin embargo, al mismo tiempo, las historias se romantizaron para cumplir con las expectativas de las audiencias del nuevo siglo, proporcionando una lectura canónica y no canónica de las novelas.

Así pues, el presente estudio sostendrá que un estudio comparativo entre Austen y Alcott ilumina la postura de las escritoras en el siglo XIX, destacando la resistencia de ciertos estereotipos, estigmas y desafíos. Al mismo tiempo, reivindicará el valor de estas

autoras en la historia de la literatura, junto con su papel como íconos populares.

### 3. CONCLUSIÓN

Después de analizar y estudiar la vida, las obras, la recepción y las adaptaciones de las novelas de las autoras, se puede observar que existe un claro paralelismo entre ellas. En cuanto a su contexto histórico, Austen y Alcott vivieron en épocas revolucionarias y tumultuosas. La época de Austen estuvo marcada por importantes acontecimientos históricos como las Guerras Napoleónicas y, de manera similar, Alcott fue testigo e incluso participó en la Guerra Civil Americana con su trabajo como enfermera. Además, ambas novelistas vivieron en épocas marcadas por fuertes desigualdades entre los sexos. Mientras que los hombres disfrutaban de libertad y podían ejercer una profesión, las mujeres estaban confinadas a la esfera doméstica, donde se esperaba que cumplieran sus funciones como esposas y madres.

Además, a pesar de las muchas restricciones que sufrieron las mujeres, Austen y Alcott fueron un ejemplo de educación sabiamente cuidada. Si bien las mujeres en el tiempo de Austen no eran educadas más allá de la lectura, la escritura y los “accomplishments,” su padre y hermanos la instruyeron y le procuraron acceso a una extensa biblioteca, que podía usar libremente. En términos similares, la educación de Alcott también fue dirigida por su padre y su madre y, como Austen, fue alentada a leer y aprender sobre el mundo sin restricciones.

La situación restrictiva de las mujeres en ambos periodos históricos fue el tema principal de los trabajos de estas autoras. Es evidente que, durante la época de Austen, el feminismo, como se lo conoce hoy, no existía; sin embargo, Austen era muy consciente de las limitaciones impuestas a su sexo y de la fuerte presión social a la que eran sometidas para cumplir sus funciones. Además, a pesar de las pocas mejoras que se produjeron en sus vidas entre la Regencia y el período posterior a la Guerra Civil Americana, el tiempo de Alcott continuó imponiéndoles restricciones, lo que la convirtió en una defensora de los derechos de las mujeres. Como resultado, aunque con algunas diferencias, ambas autoras proponen cambios en sus novelas que garanticen mejoras en sus vidas, como una mejor educación o la igualdad entre los sexos.

Esto se puede ver en sus obras más influyentes, *Orgullo y prejuicio* y *Mujercitas*. En estas novelas, Austen y Alcott desafían la estructura tradicional de la familia creando ambientes matriarcales donde los hombres son ineficientes y las mujeres dominan la narrativa. En *Orgullo y prejuicio*, Austen hace uso de la ironía para criticar las expectativas sociales de las mujeres durante el período de la Regencia. Destaca los peligros de casarse por dinero, la importancia de la educación y apoya la idea del matrimonio basado en la igualdad, el amor mutuo y el respeto. De igual modo, Alcott destaca la necesidad de una educación adecuada para las mujeres y la importancia de la igualdad y el respeto en el matrimonio; sin embargo, a diferencia de Austen, Alcott también defiende la entrada de la mujer al mundo laboral y la importancia del trabajo duro como medio para prosperar. Además, ambas escritoras desafían los estereotipos tradicionales femeninos y masculinos y proponen nuevos modelos de feminidad y masculinidad. En cuanto a los personajes femeninos, las autoras presentan un nuevo tipo de heroína, una que está ansiosa por desafiar las expectativas sociales de su tiempo y cuyo objetivo principal es el autoconocimiento y la superación personal. Igualmente, el nuevo modelo de masculinidad se basa en héroes cuyas personalidades también se pueden cambiar y mejorar gracias al autoconocimiento antes mencionado, y cuyas relaciones se basan en el compañerismo y la igualdad y no en el poder y el dinero.

Pasando a la recepción de las novelas, las escritoras siguen un patrón similar. Austen y Alcott fueron elogiadas por su realismo y sus personajes, algo que también les otorgó críticas negativas. La moralidad de sus obras fue también un punto a resaltar y la domesticidad de sus narraciones hizo que los críticos no vieran más allá de la imagen idílica de la vida familiar y la feminidad que supuestamente habían creado, dejando de lado los comentarios más importantes hechos por las autoras sobre el derecho de las mujeres a la educación, y la necesidad de reevaluar el papel de las mujeres dentro de la familia y en la esfera pública. Esto, junto con el hecho de que nunca se casaron, transformó a las autoras en “tías,” la “tía Jane” y la “tía Jo,” durante varias generaciones. Quizás el punto más divergente entre ellas fue el hecho de que Austen pronto fue reclamada por el mundo académico, otorgándole un lugar en el canon de la literatura universal. En el caso de Alcott, tendría que esperar a la segunda ola de feminismo para ser apreciada y estudiada, especialmente en relación a sus desconocidos y olvidados *penny dreadfuls*.

La continua aclamación de Austen y sus novelas en comparación con Alcott es esencial para explicar el gran contraste entre ellas en términos de número de adaptaciones contemporáneas. Si bien las obras de Austen se han reescrito para la pequeña y gran pantalla en varias ocasiones, solo *Mujercitas* ha tenido ese privilegio. Sin embargo, estas adaptaciones incluyen muchos cambios y modificaciones para hacerlas más atractivas al público actual. Los guionistas son conscientes del hecho de que la audiencia es una ávida consumidora de películas del *heritage*. En consecuencia, estas películas intentan crear una imagen idealizada del pasado y, a menudo, se inscriben en el género de los llamados *rom-coms* o *chick-flicks*, donde la narración gira en torno a las historias de amor. La adaptación resultante, a pesar de sus similitudes con el trabajo original, no siempre coincide con las ideas principales que el texto intenta defender y, como consecuencia, no pueden considerarse adaptaciones fieles con respecto a los relevantes subtextos que las autoras defienden en sus obras.

Por tanto, se ha demostrado que, a pesar de pertenecer a diferentes países y períodos históricos, ambas escritoras tienen demandas similares para mejorar la vida de las mujeres, lo que revela que su situación continuó siendo precaria durante muchos años. Además, Austen y Alcott son parte de una gran tradición de mujeres que, contra todo pronóstico, fueron lo suficientemente valientes como para hacerse oír y que, sin temor, entraron en el mundo literario, un mundo dominado por hombres, para denunciar la situación de las mujeres y mejorarla. Del mismo modo, novelas como *Orgullo y prejuicio* y *Mujercitas* se han convertido en un símbolo en la lucha por la igualdad y, hoy en día, todavía son estudiadas y apreciadas por el público, ya sea por medio del texto escrito o por una de sus muchas adaptaciones.