

REPERCUSSIONS OF WRITING UNDER SOCIALISM

GDR Retellings of Myths and Epics as Educational Tools and Challenging Testimonies

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If questioned about their favourite children's book, many former GDR citizens will state that the book of their choice is one of the adaptations of myths of classical antiquity or the retellings of medieval epics and sagas written and published for children in the GDR between 1964 and 1989 (see Peltsch 16-21). At school pupils read at least one of the twenty-four retellings, since these books became part of the school curriculum in the mid-1970s. If we consider the widespread bias that the majority of children's books written in the GDR were ideologically influenced and merely produced as a means of education, one wonders why these texts are still being reprinted today and enjoyed by adults and children alike.

These retellings were the product of one of the most extensive children's literature projects initiated by the GDR government¹. The great success of the project highlights a unique characteristic of the socialist literature dis-

course. To accomplish as much common ground among party officials, publishers, artists and readers was an unusual occurrence in the history of GDR literature. The fact that children's literature in particular supported the writers' as well as the readers' identification with the socialist society in a contrary fashion to the prescribed official policy, is the key to establishing why the project became so successful².

This aspect will also be the focus of this study. It will shed light on the ideological and conceptual backdrop of the project. At the same time it shall indicate the fundamental limitations which the government's cultural policy imposed on literary production for children in the GDR. The project will serve as a case study for investigating the question in what way children's literature in the GDR may have contributed positively to people's identification with the ideals of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Finally, the study shall explore in what way the GDR

school curriculum employed these texts for the education of the younger generations in keeping with the prevailing ideological bias.



ill. 1: Zeus and Aphrodite (illustration by Nuria Quevedo, *Prometheus*, Kinderbuchverlag 1974)

The Function of Children's Literature in the GDR

The cultural-political as well as the historical context of the initiation of this publishing project represent the starting point of this study. The GDR government committed itself to furthering the development of children's literature in sections five and thirty-two to thirty-five of the "Gesetz über die Teilnahme der Jugend am Aufbau der DDR und über die Förderung der Jugend in Schule, Beruf, bei Sport und Erholung" ("Law on the Participation of the Youth in the Establishment of the GDR and on the Promotion of the

Youth in School, Occupation, Sports and Recreation") passed on the 8 February in 1950 (see Schubbe 191). These sections determine the "Schaffung einer neuen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur" (creation of a new children's literature) and describe in detail the "Maßnahmen zur Förderung der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur durch Institutionalisierung" ("Actions of Promoting Children's Literature Through Institutionalisation"). As a consequence, the high degree of institutionalisation became a key feature of GDR children's literature. Many researchers assumed that the impact of this vast network of institutions on the production, distribution and reading/teaching of children's literature contributed to a lack of individuality and innovation³. Often such assumptions are made because the literature for children and young adults in the GDR was officially deemed to help educating children and young adults to become more responsible and active members of the socialist society (see Steinlein/Kramer 153). Yet on closer inspection this field presents itself as a more complex subject than such studies give credence to.

The stance taken by party officials towards children's literature did not change distinctly throughout the existence of the GDR. Its outlook was

rooted in the tradition of proletarian-revolutionary children's literature of the late 19th and early 20th century. From the very beginnings of its development GDR literature was officially attached to a particular understanding of its function in society which was defined as the "Erziehungsauftrag" (educational mission, see Heuenkamp 143). This doctrine of literature, established on a moral basis defined literature as a means of re-educating an entire society. It was this doctrine in particular that determined the history of GDR literature, because it was based on the idea that the GDR was founded as a "new-born state of peace" in which a new and better society could be established after 1945 (see Heuenkamp 144). The doctrine was based on the notion of the supremacy of the ethical, and upon the somewhat religious belief that human beings are convertible and can be re-educated (see Mayer 2). It was a reaction to the twelve years of Nazi rule and intended to constitute the common ground between all divisions in society.

The key notion of this doctrine was that the new state founded in the Soviet Zone was a nation in which the term "Heimat" (home country) took on the new connotation of "eine Gemeinschaft Gleichgesinnter" (a community of like-minded people, Heuenkamp

144)). This label was thought to give the people the means of establishing a new identity, free from the burden of recent German history.

Literature was integrated into this understanding of culture as a core element, from which the claim was derived to represent the national literature. The task of building and at the same time representing a better Germany tied the authors a "positive", that is a value constituting, concept of literature (Heuenkamp 144).

The symbolic re-evaluation of the GDR as home country initially resulted in the neutralisation of a lot of the critical potential of literature and led to the affirmation of the political system of the GDR. It served as a powerful means of identification with the new system and of dealing with many Germans' feeling of guilt.

However, this ideological and cultural-political backdrop of the literary sphere provoked the opposition of many artists as early as 1950, one year after the founding of the GDR, and resulted in continual clashes between cultural politicians and artists. The fact that children's literature remained the indisputable dominion of this doctrine until the late 1960s does not imply that societal movements failed to have an effect on children's books. In a way, the

sphere of children's literature highlights more clearly how little the prescriptive official doctrine, and the reality of literary production had in common. The doctrine was rigid but superficial, and the literature, which was fairly diverse, developed relatively independently.

The Publishing Project as a Means of Functionalising Children's Literature

Regarding the publishing project, the treatment of myths and epics initiated an inquiry into the substance of Marxist-Leninist ideology and its value for the future of human society. A debate that went almost unnoticed by officials. The empty notions SED officials held as regards children, unwittingly, permitted greater scope for artists to explore new aesthetic, formal, as well as philosophical concepts in their children's books. That is why issues classified as controversial like the protection of the environment, dysfunctional families or the manipulation of people by means of language were tackled in children's books before writers turned to them in adult literature³. That such critical potential went largely unnoticed was a result of governmental policy lacking definition of children's literature, aside from the lofty notion of the "educational mis-



ill. 2: "Die Hundertarmigen" i.e. the Titanic monsters with one hundred arms and legs (illustration by Nuria Quevedo, *Prometheus*, Kinderbuchverlag 1974)

sion" and the task of socialisation for which it was assigned. The official approach to children was merely dominated by the idea that education meant shaping young socialist personalities, as responsible and active members of the socialist society (see Steinlein/ Kramer 153)⁴. Children were not considered as independently thinking individuals and consequently seen as less of a threat to the status quo.

Since literary production and reception were regarded a means of identification with the new socialist state on German soil, the SED had to choose carefully the historical and artistic traditions it would acknowledge. These traditions should become a crucial element in the development of the new society and promote GDR culture in keeping with the government's ideological claim. The selection

of traditions became a key feature of SED cultural policy when the government developed its heritage policy in the early 1950s, which revolved around the attempt at changing the working class into producers and recipients of socialist culture on a new level (see Hörnigk 202).

The Function of the Publishing Project

When officials in the Ministry of Culture drew up the plan for the publishing project in 1956 it was a direct reaction to the new heritage policy of the SED, which was set out to re-establish crucial cultural traditions as part of the heritage of GDR literature. Children were supposed to learn about the myths of classical antiquity, and the epics and sagas from the Middle Ages. The publishing project was also launched to introduce other literary traditions such as Celtic, Indian, or Hebrew epics. In this way, such cultural traditions could help accomplish the task “to open up the entire cultural heritage of mankind as a source for the development of the socialist personality as well as aesthetic pleasure” (see Emmrich 55). Children would get to know the old texts and be encouraged subsequently to read the originals with the socialist readings from the project in mind. Among the govern-

ment’s objectives we come upon the key purpose of the programme:

Being introduced to myths of classical antiquity is useful in the sense that these texts can communicate an idea of experiences of people in the past to our children. Familiarity with these stories prevents our children from turning away from political problems to a surrogate reality (Haase 595).

In the GDR, the comparison of their own living conditions with the experiences of people in the past was always geared to pointing out that life in a socialist society was superior to the inequality people had been faced with in the past. This notion represents another attempt to gear the young generation towards identification with the state. True to their incli-



ill. 3: Kronos forcefully removing his son from his wife Rhea (illustration by Nuria Quevedo, *Prometheus*, Kinderbuchverlag 1974)

nation to supervise all literary development, the Ministry of Culture in Berlin appointed the two biggest publishers of children's books in the country, the *Verlag Neues Leben* and the *Kinderbuchverlag* to administer the project. The publishers were left with the task of directing the translation of these extra-literary requirements into interesting and thrilling books of high quality for children – a difficult task to fulfil.

The Adaption of *Reineke Fuchs* by Franz Fühmann

In this example I want to show in which manner authors and editors set out to realise the publishing project in their day-to-day practise. The scope of this study only allows me to take a closer look at the publication process of *Reineke Fuchs*, which was the first title of the project, published in 1964. However, this case study will highlight the difficulties and limitations that arose on realising cultural political premises in literary texts for children.

When writing the plan for his *Reynke de vos*-adaptation Fühmann did neither allude to the political nor the ideological implications he had in mind for his rendering of the villain's adventures. Yet these extra-literary factors became a great influence on his adaptation of the Low German animal epic. Although the author had decided



ill. 4: Werner Klemke's cover of *Reineke Fuchs* (Kinderbuchverlag 1982)

to omit the stale morals at the end of each chapter of the original, his adaptation is not necessarily less didactic and moralising than the old *Reynke de vos*. Fühmann altered a lot of aspects of the original in his version. He described the villain's story in a more colourful way. He abridged the language and simplified the plot. He kept the humorous dialogues but made them less crude. He shortened the original considerably and was thus accomplishing to tell a thrilling story for children. Fühmann also made modifications regarding the characterisation of the fox's personality. A review by Sändig, published in the GDR in 1974, defends Fühmann's transformation of the original as follows:

Fühmann abridged rightfully where the original highlights the

contradictory nature of Reineke's character. By designing the fox as a negative character he prevents two possible readings which are potentially dangerous. On the one hand the child's sympathy for the fox could easily encourage a cult for "the strong personality". On the other hand Fühmann had to counter rigorously Reineke's attitude that the sole objective of every man's life is to promote his personal advantage and improvement. (1982, 130)

In addition to the modifications that were clearly made in order to support the children's understanding of the medieval story, the author wrote an afterword for his young readers in which he explicitly suggested an interpretation of his text. Here rather than in the actual adaptation Fühmann spelled out the relation of Reineke's story to the context of the GDR. The afterword begins as follows:

Now the book of Reineke's misdeeds has come to an end, and surely you, my dear girls and boys, will be asking at this moment: "Is this really the way of the world? Is it true that the worst and most cunning villain can call the shots?" . . . And what is true of you is true of our country: The one who acts for the common good and who helps his fellow men, who is assiduous and honest and just, he will prosper and be respected; but

anyone who should attempt to imitate Reineke or Isegrim would soon end up in prison. (Fühmann 1982, 76)

In order to illustrate the double-edged nature of fables as potentially socio-critical texts, the author explains why the characters in fables are animals with human characteristics. He claims:

With the help of these fables common people expressed what they were not allowed to say openly, their dissatisfaction with the status quo and their hopes for a better, more just future. In a fable you could portray certain types without being explicit. (1982, 76)

With his *Reineke Fuchs*, he joined a long tradition of adapting the *Reynard* story for the purposes of a different societal context. However, in contrast with other interpreters, Fühmann's criticism of society expressed in the book did not refer to the GDR, but to societies distant in time or location practising the rule of the powerful over the powerless. In his afterword Fühmann presented his readers with a reading which leaves no doubt about his intention to depict the "bad" Reynard as the opposite of the "good" socialist personality⁵. According to his afterword, *Reineke Fuchs* set out to highlight the achievements of socialist society, which, supposedly, had put an

end to inequality and to the “bad” ruling the “good”⁶. The young writer, who was then still very much convinced of his role as an educator of younger generations, spelled out his own convictions in a rather naive manner. The naivety reflected in this afterword was a concession to the age of his readers, but it also highlights the didactic approach to writing for children, which the author practised at the time. The political orthodoxy of the language used in the afterword was Fühmann’s attempt to depict history as a spiritual progression towards perfection - in the sense of establishing the communist society, the community of mankind. In this case Fühmann did try to conform to the various official requirements for introducing texts from the cultural heritage to children in the GDR. Here the author can be seen to over-emphasise extra-literary factors and the direct link between societal shifts and literary developments.

The editing of this afterword represents a surprising case of “reverse censorship” and gives a first indication of the fact that writers and editors deemed it impossible to directly translate political strategies into literature. When the editor Regina Hänsel revised Fühmann’s draft, she asked him to alter the most pro-socialist statements, in which Fühmann had some-



ill. 5: Reinecke has tricked the bear (ill. by Klemke, Kinderbuchverlag 1982)

what overstated the direct link between socialist ideology and the story of *Reineke Fuchs*. In one of these passages he had outlined the course of historical development from the Middle Ages up to life in the socialist GDR as uninterrupted progress:

Here in our country there are no longer thieves like Nobel and Reineke, we have driven them out. In other countries the weapons of the rich were and still are the power of the state and religion. (10)

In the afterword which the *Kinderbuchverlag* eventually published, the same passage reads as follows:

Naturally the poor people were discontented with their lot and they would soon have driven away the rich and idle if the latter had not possessed two effective weapons: the power of the state and religion. (1982, 77)

Fühmann concludes with what he considers the essence of the story: “In nature there is no good or evil. However, man can use his ability in a good or in a bad way” (1982, 79). In the composition of the conclusion there is another example of Hänsel’s “reverse censorship”. Fühmann had written: “Today a person like Reineke would not get very far in our country” (10). Yet the final version of the text says: “Today someone like Reineke Fuchs would not get very far. The one who uses his ability for the common good will thrive in our country” (1982: 79). This altered conclusion reads like an interpretation of the *Reynke de vos* of 1498, applying not just to the socialist society of the GDR but to human society in general. With this, Fühmann actually reverted to the essence of the moral commentary of the original *Reynke de vos*, as summarized by Felix Summerly in his preface to a translation into English of 1846:

[The story] beareth in it much excellent morality and hidden wisdom, worth both thy regard in reading, and thine application in the course of thy life and actions; for the aim at which it bendeth is the overthrow of vice, and the advancement of the good and virtuous. (Summerly ii)

Ten years after its publication Fühmann strongly criticised his first contribution to the project. He wrote a commentary “Grausames vom Fuchs” in which he explained his approach in the early 1960s:

I was censoring myself, doing it persistently and totally without thinking about it. It took a long time to free myself from this habit, very long, maybe too long for me to be able to draw the final conclusion and be confident. . . I realized: ... Either you decide to tell the complete story or you should not attempt to tell it at all. (1981, 320)

In spite of all the criticism listed here Fühmann’s *Reineke* adaptation is an exciting children’s book of an aesthetically high standard (see 1981, 317-320). The author had learned the hard



ill. 6: Reineke has tricked the wolf whose tail is now trapped in ice (ill. by Klemke, *Reineke Fuchs*, Kinderbuchverlag 1982)

way that it is not possible to translate cultural-political or didactic programmes directly into literature without disregarding the idiosyncrasies of this art form. With hindsight it seems like an irony of fate that Fühmann himself ended up employing a similar strategy to the author of the original *Reynard* epic in order to avoid censorship and to be able to “what he really thought” (1982, 76). This applies above all to his adaptation of Prometheus – his last contribution to the publishing project in 1973, in which he clearly communicated his criticism of GDR society. A major shift in Fühmann’s and many other GDR writers’ thinking occurred when they abandoned their belief in the utopian potential of the reality of socialism in the GDR. They eventually turned towards myth, which became a key feature of the critical GDR literature for adults in the 1970s and 1980s.

A Praise of the Working Class: State Control in the GDR Classrooms

The fact that the treatment of the adaptations was suggested by the school curriculum reveals the surprising fact that there was one element all contributions to the project had in common. In a letter to his editor, Fühmann alluded to the difficulty he had

encountered in trying to find direct links between the story of *Reineke Fuchs* and key issues of SED ideology:

I am not in a position to relate the reflections on society any more closely to Reineke, because the aspect we are most concerned with, namely working people, is only mentioned once in the Reineke story. The same applies to religion. (5)

The focus on the value of human work and the influence of the working process on the progress of human society became the single unchanging characteristic of all the author’s adaptations in spite of the fact that his outlook on the project changed dramatically. In fact, all the texts of the project have this one feature in common. Emmrich called this innovation in the treatment of traditional texts the “poetic representation of the production process” (Sändig 129). Sändig describes Fühmann’s approach to highlighting the great value of human work in his *Reineke Fuchs* as follows:

In the original the workmen remain unknown. Fühmann however expressly appraises this work as the creation of skilful working people. (129)

The importance of the working people for the progress of humanity was the aspect the GDR school cur-

riculum focused on most strongly, too (see *Unterrichtshilfen Klasse 6* and *Klasse 7*). It explained that children were to read these modern GDR specific versions of the myths because in these adaptations “The enemies are named directly, the dreams are becoming more realistic, the future is becoming brighter” (see *Unterrichtshilfen Klasse 6*, 17). The versions of *Hercules* by Hüttner and of Homer’s *Ilias* and *Odyssee* by Fühmann, the first texts from the project to be taught at schools, were defined as final and infinitely “valid” interpretations of these particular myths. In addition to the poetic depiction of the working men the curriculum highlighted the fact that his work was supposed to help man live an independent existence and contribute to his conscious decision to overthrow his rulers. The interpretation the curriculum suggested also pointed out that this concept goes hand in hand with the de-mythologizing myth. Teachers were advised to focus on societal issues and do away with the crucial elements of inexplicable notions, and the potential of endless interpretations myths embody. Thus the adaptations would eventually fit into the context of the prescribed concept of socialist realism. The curriculum suggested that the pupils should in any case understand

that life in the GDR represented the realisation of the dreams of the old peoples who invented these stories.

The interpretation of the new adaptations of traditional texts for children in the curriculum represents a special method of state control. It sheds light on the common practice of the government to disregard what actually transpired in children’s books and instead exclusively emphasise the aspects, which conformed to the sanctioned way of thinking. The focus on human work, which the curriculum stressed, did in fact exist and provides us with an interesting insight into the contradictory nature of the entire literary sphere. Nevertheless other factors such as the socio-critical ideas, and the new aesthetic concepts tried in the adaptations were utterly ignored by officials. Their objective was simple: to achieve the children’s identification with their doctrine by any means.

Conclusion: A Double-Edged Success

The success of the publishing project was of a double-edged nature⁷. As our case study of *Reineke Fuchs* indicated, it proved impossible for authors to directly translate ideological prerequisites into literature. This was an obstacle for the realisation of the cultural-political target of the publishing

project. Nevertheless my analysis of the curriculum testifies that officials interpreted the literary output of the project as the realisation of their objectives. This contradiction alludes to the fact that the lofty cultural policy and the reality of literary production became distinctly disjointed.

The project was successful among artists because authors were encouraged to reflect critically on their role in society as writers as well as on their individual approach to their work. The particular way of interpreting such literary traditions evolved due to the authors' attempt to live up to the ideal of the author as the educator of the younger generations. This special approach made the project successful. It proves that readers as well as the authors involved, many of whom belonged to the group of writers who were officially classified as oppositional and highly critical, did to some degree identify with the ideal of a socialist utopia. Yet they did not necessarily agree with the reality of socialism in the GDR. It is a characteristic of these children's books that authors felt encouraged to explore the chances of survival of the socialist ideal in a playful manner that provided more scope for authors to discuss concepts of a socialist utopia different from those of the officially sanctioned ideology. Al-

though the common ground between all contributors resided in the appreciation of the power of the working people the literary output of the project does not represent a uniform canon. The aspect of the importance of human work for the evolution of mankind is only one of many issues writers were concerned with in their adaptations. The success of the project is also based on the artists' high esteem for their readers, since their child-like heroes are depicted as the force that helps mankind survive.

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NOTES

¹ Another project was the publication of the Hausmärchen by the Grimm brothers in the 1950s. The significance of this particular publishing project was marked by the controversies it entailed. Ebert summarises this debate as follows: “In der Kinderliteratur war ...die Auseinandersetzung um das Märchen im Zentrum aller Erbe-Diskussionen – vor allem in den frühen 50er Jahren. Viele Aspekte waren im Gespräch. Sie lassen sich alle auf eine Achse bringen zwischen den Polen Pädagogik und Poesie, wie weit können wir, war zu fragen, den poetischen Potenzen des Volksmärchens trauen? Wieweit sind solche überlieferten Texte aus sich heraus fähig, erzieherisch zu wirken?” (Ebert 278).

² The publishing project had a longer life span than any state-initiated project for literary production in the GDR, its output was - and still is - widely read, the books written for it won national and international awards. Many writers felt enticed to start writing for children because of the project, and a number of the texts reflected on the vision of a socialist utopia within the reality of GDR society; considerations which were instigated by the countless interpretations of these mythological stories in many literary traditions. The supervision of the work of the *Kinderbuchverlag* and *Verlag Neues Leben* was assigned to the GDR youth organisations. That is why editors had to carry out the difficult task of censoring. This will have contributed to the fact that the censorship regarding the project was not very harsh. For many authors adapting a myth or an epic for children meant also to get a financially worthwhile contract that appeared easy and quickly to fulfil. The financial attraction of the project serves as an explanation for the rather varied quality of its output. Mainly in the 1970s, when the biggest number of books was published for the project, authors turned to adapting myths for children in order to earn more and to be able to publish at all. Many of these writers faced problems with censors in the sphere of adult literature. That is why the list of authors who contributed at that time reads like a blacklist of the GDR literary scene. We come across names such as Fritz Rudolf Fries, Franz Fühmann, Sarah Kirsch, Rolf Schneider, Werner Heiduzeck and Günter de Bruyn.

³ This high degree of institutionalisation of the children’s literature sphere was a typical feature of all societies of the Soviet type. As regards children’s literature in particular governments believed it to be essential to fully control the processes in this field, since books for children were considered a key element of education. The institutionalisation was also carried out since extensive state control and supervision, which had to be carried out by the established state institutions, dominated the entire socialist society.

⁴ Benno Pludra tackled the issue of environmental protection in his children’s books, Günter Saalman wrote about family issues in *Umberto* and Franz Fühmann dealt with the potential of manipulation in language in *Prometheus* (1974) and *Die dampfenden Hälse der Pferde im Turm zu Babel* (1976).

⁵ The term “sozialistische Persönlichkeit” stems from the GDR educational policy of the Ulbricht-era. Officials used this term in order to summarize the objectives of education in the GDR. According to this concept, all children were to be brought up in a way that would enable them to feel deeply rooted in socialist society and to conceive of themselves as part of the great communist movement.

⁶The first three hundred years of the history of adapting the *Reynard* story are characterized by its functionalization as a means of challenging the status quo. Whereas the first German translation was challenging the rule of the church, Goethe's rendering was a critical account of the practice of law enforcement in Germany. Yet Fühmann detached his *Reineke Fuchs* from a direct link to society in the GDR and thus omitted a key trait of traditional interpretations of *Reynke de vos* (see Scheffler 101).

⁷In spite of the – in GDR terms – great success of this project it was very little recognised in the academic sphere as well as in the sphere of adult literature. The first history of GDR literature published in 1976 made no mention of the project regardless of the fact that more than fifteen of the most successful GDR children's books had been produced as part of it. Academic research on the project was only undertaken in teacher training colleges, mainly with a focus on teaching the books in schools. The most influential literary journals in the GDR very seldom published reviews and studies of the project. The distinctive disproportion between the governmental input in the project and the appreciation of its final outcomes is a reflection of the contradictory nature of GDR cultural policy. The government invested large sums of money and a great effort to instigate and maintain the project. Yet when it as regards the acknowledgement of the literary output of the project it was the political and academic officials but not the readers and other artists who failed to recognise the achievements of their own initiative. This was mainly the consequence of the attitude officials held towards children's literature – since it was more than anything else considered a means to an end as opposed to an artistic achievement of its own right.

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