

HOW CAN WE ‘TEACH’ IDEOLOGIES TO CHILDREN? THE PARADIGM OF A CONTEMPORARY GREEK ILLUSTRATED ADAPTATION OF A MEDIEVAL NARRATIVE POEM

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Abstract. In this article we argue that literary works for children aim at ‘teaching’ their young readers specific ideologies, i.e. specific attitudes towards the world they live in and specific ways of acting and behaving within it. That is accomplished through the language, the ‘story’ and the significance of such works.

To support our argument we use the paradigm of “Niko and the Wolf” – a contemporary Greek illustrated book which is an adaptation of a medieval narrative poem written by Kostas Poulos and illustrated by Svetlin Vassilev. We aim at showing what ideological shifts take place when we try to re-shape an old story for adults according to contemporary ideologies and then try to promote the adapted story to young readers. Moreover, the specific paradigm is illustrated and it therefore offers the opportunity to examine the ideological nature and role of the pictures in the telling of a story.

First, we examine the text of the book, its anachronisms, its intertextual allusions and its carnivalesque character in order to show how the above parameters relate to its ideological impact on its readers. Secondly, we turn to the pictures of the book and again we examine their anachronisms but also the irony they create by promoting meanings that differ from those of the text; we also pinpoint their energetic role in the construction of the meanings and the ideas that underlie them.

Keywords: children’s literature, ideology, medieval, Greek narrative poem, illustrated book

Apart from entertaining children and from cultivating their imagination, children’s literature has always been written in order to socialize children, in other words in order to inculcate ideologies upon them. It is, therefore, *inherently* ideological: as John Stephens aptly observes, “what the otherwise rather amorphous body of literary texts for children has in common is an impulse to intervene in the lives of children” (Stephens, 1992: 8). Literary texts as well as their illustrations ‘teach’ children how to become members of their society, in other words, how to

‘see’ their world, how to think about it and, of course how to act and behave within it. Their ideologies are encoded in them either implicitly, that is *passively*, or, more often than not, explicitly, that is *energetically*, by advocating specific beliefs, attitudes, behaviours (Hollindale, 1988: 13 – 14): a great number of contemporary children’s books, for instance, advocate ecological thinking or anti-racist attitudes.

The ideology that permeates all literary texts can be inscribed, first of all, at the level of their language. As has been argued from a number of theoretical perspectives, language as a system of signification is endemically and pervasively imbued with ideology (Stephens, 1992: 1): its words, its syntax, its rule-systems and its codes are fraught with ideologies. Moreover, ideology in literary texts may be inscribed at the level of their ‘story’ as well as at the level of their ‘significance’ (ibid. 12 – 13). As mentioned above, however, in the special case of literary works for children, ideology can also get inscribed in them through their pictures which constitute another means of story-telling.

By examining a contemporary Greek illustrated book for children, which is an adaptation of a medieval Greek narrative poem, we will show how the ideologies inscribed in the text itself but also in the pictures of the book get communicated to its young readers. But first, we need to make an introductory comment about the nature of adaptations. When a literary text gets adapted and when, moreover, it gets illustrated, it inevitably changes not only in terms of its content or its form but, more importantly, in terms of the impact it has on its readers. In the case under consideration the didactic medieval narrative poem for adults gets adapted and illustrated in such a way that it becomes a humorous, provocative and playful story for young children. What is interesting to observe, however, is that as the re-telling of the source text is transferred into a new social, cultural and ideological context on the one hand, and as it now address a new audience, that is, an audience of children, its ideological connotations change.

Stephens and McCallum have shown that such a passage from the source text to its re-telling is organized through metanarratives i.e. through “global or totalizing cultural narrative schemata which order and explain knowledge and experience” (Stephens & McCallum, 1998: 16). Therefore, any attempt to examine the metanarrative which organizes a textual or a pictorial re-telling inevitably involves the examination of the ideologies that are inscribed in it. For, all adaptations use the original work as a framework for the inculcation of specific ideologies upon the readers. They may reproduce the ideologies which are inscribed within the original work itself or they may produce new, even antithetical, ideological positions which are, inevitably, related to the social context of the time of the adaptation. For instance, one of the many contemporary illustrated adaptations of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* for children, namely the one by Sophia Zarambouka (1977), became a vehicle for the inculcation not only of the pacifist ideology that was inscribed in the original text but also of feminist ideological positions (Kalkani, 2004: 75,76). The

latter were a far cry from the ideology of the original comedy, but reflected aspects of the ideological ambience of the time of the adaptation. Zarambouka’s adaptation, then, serves as a paradigm of a “metanarrative” which demonstrates the contemporary “metaethic”, that is, the ideological framework that characterized the time and the place of the production of the metanarrative” (Stephens & McCallum, *ibid.*).

In our approach, therefore, of the textual but also of the pictorial aspects of the adaptation under examination we will examine what ideologies are inscribed in them and whether such ideologies are reproductions of the ones inscribed within the original work or new ones, related to the social context of the time of the adaptation.

The contemporary picture book we will focus on, which is titled “O Nikos ke o Likos” (“Niko and the Wolf”) (2002) has been adapted for children by Kostas Poulos and has been illustrated by Svetlin Vassilev¹.

As mentioned above, it is an adaptation of a 500-verse long folk narrative poem² that belongs to the post-Byzantine era reproducing motifs already existent in the Aesopian fables but also in the oral tradition of the Byzantine period. The source text was first published [in Greek] in Venice in 1539 under the title “Γαδάρον, λύκου κι αλουπούς διήγησις ωραία” [“A nice narrative of a donkey, a wolf and a fox”]. It must have been a widely known and popular narrative poem since it crossed boundaries and found its way, centuries later, into a book of tales published by Jacob Grimm (1840). Although the contributors of the illustrated adaptation state clearly that their work is based on the particular source text, it is not clear on which *version* of the latter it is based, which, however, is a fairly common condition in the case of adaptations of old literary works (Stephens & McCallum, 1998: 3 – 5).

The story that is related in the source text is this: a very hungry fox and an equally hungry wolf, who appear to be living together, come upon a donkey. As they scheme to eat him, they befriend him and attempt to persuade him to join them in a journey across the sea. However, the donkey manages to outwit them and kick them off the boat on which they are travelling; thus he saves his life and ridicules his rivals. The structure of the plot, the binary opposition between the good and the bad, the eventual triumph of justice, which, importantly, coincides with the victory of the weak, but also the comic, at times sarcastic, and overtly didactic style



Picture 1

of the narrative all echo the oral tradition of the Middle Ages on the one hand and the Aesopian fables on the other. In terms of the plot, the contemporary re-teller keeps the framework of the source text but omits many of the incidents included in the latter. Because he is not interested in fidelity he also reconstructs the dialogues between the characters in a very loose way, losing at times contact with the source text. Thus he manages to bring the story to date and to make it not only relevant to children readers but also accessible to them. Eventually, the adapted text becomes less than half the size of the source text that is around 2000 words, which, together with the illustrations, make an average-sized book for young readers.

In terms of the form of the textual narrative, Poulos has chosen to retain the 15-syllable rhyming verse of the original narrative poem: in fact he uses the rhyme as a means of accentuating the humor that permeates it. He has also retained the colloquial tongue-in-the-cheek style of the source text, transferred, however, to a contemporary Greek demotic idiom. The above formal choices result in an ironical effect: for, in terms of its form the text seems traditional while in terms of its content, as will be shown, it is unmistakably contemporary.

What are, then, the ideas that the writer of the adaptation seeks to ‘teach’ his young readers through his verbal and formal choices? We can easily observe that the central binary ideological opposition that underlies the original story, that is the opposition between the ‘strong’, which equals the carnivorous animals, and the ‘weak’, which equals the herbivores, is kept intact in the case of the re-told story. If we take into account the above equation, we can interpret the latter as the struggle of the powerless against the powerful and their eventual triumphant victory over the latter. Such an allegory takes on a special meaning if read vis-a-vis the historical and social context of the 16th century within which the source text was produced. For, after the fall of Constantinople and the collapse of the Byzantine Empire, the impoverished rural population of Greeks, who found themselves the weaklings of the Ottoman Empire, easily identified with a weak herbivore like the donkey which manages to kick his oppressors into the sea (Chatzopoulou – Karavia, 1986: 101).

What is interesting to examine, however, is why such a moral ‘lesson’ like the one that emanates from the source text remains intact in its contemporary re-telling. It is not, we want to argue, a question of remaining loyal to the source text, since, as was mentioned above, Poulos is keen on demonstrating his distance from it. Besides, fidelity has never been an issue in the study of adaptations. Indeed, as Julie Sanders reminds us, “it is usually at the very point of infidelity that the most creative acts of adaptation and appropriation take place” (Sanders, 2006: 20). More likely, the central ideological assumption of the original story is reproduced because it is in tune with contemporary education politics: the view that children need to develop an ethical understanding which will allow them to assess the operation of power in the world and the range of responses available to them (cf. Whitely, 1996: 92) is shared, we want to argue, by the majority of contemporary Greek

teachers but also by writers and publishers of children's literature. Consequently, a contemporary literary work like *O Nikos ke o Likos* can be seen as a pleasant way of introducing young children to such an ethical understanding and of offering them one such exemplary reaction, as the one of the victorious hero, to the imposition of power.

Staying with the question of ideology, we must stress the fact that the adapted text makes a point of bringing its contemporariness to the forefront of the reader's attention. For that reason, the sardonic humor that permeates the original text is now given a different twist by a number of anachronisms which highlight the time but also the cultural gap between the original and its adaptation.³ Generally speaking, anachronisms in adaptations (especially, as we will show, in the case of their illustrations which are freer than the text from obvious restrictions) are chosen on the basis of mainly their ideological connotations, and thus constitute indicators of the metanarrative schemata that are being used by the re-tellers of the original story. They belong, that is, to those adapting techniques through which specific meaning(s) are prioritized over others and specific subject positions are constructed for the perception of the overall meaning of the adaptation (cf. Kalkani, 2004).

In the case we are examining we observe a number of anachronisms in the form of references to 'healthy diets', 'antibiotics' or 'newspaper articles' which introduce contemporary ideological preoccupations, such as the pros of a healthy vegetarian diet or the cons of being overweight, into a unlikely context. Precisely because such references are 'out of place' in a traditional tale, they become humorous and consequently add to the overall tongue-in-the-cheek style of the textual narration. Thus, they give the adapted text a 'carnavalesque' character. For, carnival in children's literature is grounded in a playfulness which situates itself in positions of nonconformity. It expresses opposition to authoritarianism and seriousness, and is often manifested as parody of prevailing literary forms and genres in non-canonical forms (Stephens, 1992: 121).

At the same time, however, we must not lose from sight the fact that precisely because the adapted text has such a humorous and carnivalesque character, its imbued ideologies are more easily transmitted to its young readers as they are 'disguised' as innocent jokes and language games.

We now want to turn to the pictures of the book under consideration and examine their role in the construction of particular ideological positions. But before we turn to specific examples we need to make clear our theoretical standpoint vis-à-vis the question of *illustrating* adaptations: pictures in such cases function, we want to argue, in the same way as words. For, like words, they, too, inscribe their social, cultural and ideological context and like words, they, too, convey ideologies. Consequently, they, too, constitute a metanarrative through which the source text is 'interpreted' while being adapted. Generally speaking, the pictures of an illustrated book do not only offer narrative information which completes the meaning(s) of the

textual narrative but also construct specific ideological positions which may or may not coincide with those constructed by the text (cf. Nodelman, 1988, Stephens & McCallum, 1998, Kalkani, 2004). In the case of illustrated *adaptations* however, things may sometimes get complicated, for there are cases in which the illustrator chooses to depict characters or scenes as presented in the *source text* rather than in the adapted text constructing in this way ideological positions which may differ from those inscribed in the text.⁴

In the case under examination, Svetlin Vassilev has chosen to remain faithful to the *adapted* text by depicting the scenes described. However, he has also chosen to keep a distance from it both in terms of the narrative information his pictures carry and in terms of the ideological positions they construct. Indeed, in most of the illustrated double spreads the text and the pictures provide



Picture 2

such different narrative information that their relation eventually becomes ironical (Nodelman, 1988: 222 – 241). More specifically, pictures consistently show the readers other from or more than what words tell them: for instance, while the words relate how the fox and the wolf come upon the donkey and try to persuade him to leave his master and follow them in their supposed “exploration of the world”, the pictorial depiction of the wolf reveals the real intentions of the couple by showing him holding a fork and a knife behind his back.

The observant readers, therefore, are in a privileged position: for, they find out more than what the words say. In that way they find themselves in the typical position in which they are placed by the narrative strategy of irony. Moreover, they know more than the donkey himself knows since the words present him as a ‘fool’⁵: using, therefore, the terminology concerning the ancient Greek tragedy we could argue that the readers experience a typical case of “tragic irony”, of knowing, that is, more than the protagonist himself / herself does.

An ironical relation between words and picture is also inevitably created when the reverse takes place, when, that is, words say more than pictures do, which is what also happens on every single double-spread of the book we are examining: by reading the dialogues between the characters, the readers know much more than what the pictures show them. Thus, when they take a second good look at a particular picture, they utilize the information they gather from the words and they inevitably see what is shown in a

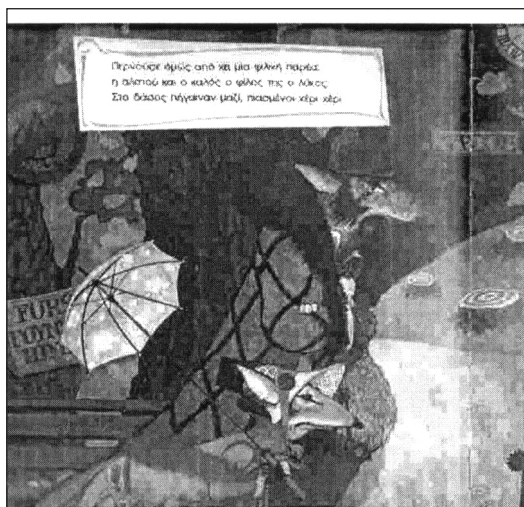
different light.

The ironical relation between the picture and the text that co-exist on the same page is, we want to argue, a fruitful relation in any case. That may be the reason why both the writer and the illustrator of the book do their best to create it – for the sake of their readers. For, such a relation makes the readers energetic: in order to construct the meaning of the page they have in front of them, they have to synthesize the information they gather from words and pictures respectively into one compound whole. Moreover, it teaches them a basic principle concerning the reading of illustrated books: that neither the words nor the pictures alone can communicate the ‘truth’ of the story.

In other words, young readers become conscious of the fact that ‘reality’ is much more complex than it appears. The latter, we may as well add, is a lesson that does not only concern the reading of an illustrated book; it extends, we want to argue, to the young readers’ broader experience of the world that surrounds them.

While examining the ideology of the pictures, we want to focus on one central stratagem on the part of the illustrator, namely, his highlighting of the anachronism between the appearance of the characters on the one hand and of their surroundings on the other. As is shown in picture No. 1, the three animals are fairly realistic in their animal characteristics but they are quite anthropomorphous in their posture, their gestures and grimaces and in their appearance in general⁶. However, while they are dressed in an old-fashioned style that brings to mind the upper class fashion of the 19th century, their surroundings are undoubtedly contemporary. Let us examine a picture in which such deliberate discrepancy becomes evident.

According to what the text relates, the wolf and the fox are going to the nearest forest to look for food when they bump into the donkey. In the accompanying picture we do not see the actual scene of their encounter, but we have the opportunity to observe the two carnivorous animals as, arm in arm, they enter the scene from the left heading for the forest. They are dressed in meticulously styled 19th century clothes which are drawn in great detail [for instance, a bow-tie and assorted gloves for the wolf, an umbrella and jewellery for the fox]. They seem to be moving in urban surroundings, for, there is an old-fashioned clock as well as park benches nearby. The forest for which they are supposed to be heading is only alluded to by a signpost pointing to its direc-



Picture 3

tion. In the background, one can discern some big trees deliberately drawn in outlandish purple colours so as to look artificial and not real. However, what the readers notice in the forefront of the picture is a representation of a destroyed 'real' forest: a bleak space filled with what has been left of felled trees, with no sign of vegetation and with notices advertising "land for sale" and "furs on sale here". That is by no means a representation of a 19th century 'forest'; rather, it is an allusion to contemporary phenomena such as fires set on purpose or the illegal hunting of wild animals.

An initial comment on the above picture but also generally on pictures like the above is that they serve as highly symbolic representations of the inherently intertextual character of the adaptation to which they belong. For, they manage to depict the very moment when the adapted text 'meets' its precursor, the moment when the world of the past and the contemporary world meet up in a visual pastiche, a composition, that is, made up of fragments (Dentith, 2000:194, quoted in Sanders, 2006: 5). The role of pictures in bringing out the intertextual character of the text can be observed in most illustrated adaptations especially so, however, when intertextuality⁷ is an explicit narrative strategy, as in the case we are examining, when, that is, both the text *and* the pictures openly declare themselves as re-tellings of a particular source text.

Intertextuality, however, is especially popular among contemporary writers and illustrators of children's literature for one more reason. Because it is a narrative strategy whereby one text is related to other pre-existing ones, thus acquiring a particular meaning, it often plays a very important role in the writer's or the illustrator's attempt to produce certain meanings at the expense of others. Consequently, an intertextual work of literature can be especially important in the socialization of its readers as it 'teaches' them specific ideologies.

Such intertextual pictures as the above example are fraught with ideological connotations. Readers may find their medley of references humorous, but at the same time they will inevitably stop and think twice when, for instance, they see what has been left of the forest. Even the *young* readers, whom such an illustrated book seems to target, may not fail to grasp the illustrator's allusion to the contemporary problem of the destructive forest fires that are set on purpose by land-grabbers; or again, they will not miss the ecological point against the killing of animals for their fur that is made by the pictorial hint of the "furs on sale here" sign that points in the direction of the forest. Pictures like this then do not only form a metanarrative through which alternative ideological positions get constructed; they also 'construct' an energetic type of reader / viewer since they encourage their reader to ponder over their allusions, to try and answer the questions they raise and, eventually, to share in the implicit ideological positions that they construct.

If now we look back at all the aspects of the contemporary illustrated adaptation we have discussed so far, we can first of all conclude that the latter transcends a mere imitation of the source text; instead, it serves in the capacity of what Zabuz calls "incremental" literature (Zabuz, 2002: 4, quoted in Sanders, 2006: 12) since

it adds, it supplements, it improvises and it innovates (Sanders, *ibid.*). Secondly, we conclude that because it is an illustrated adaptation addressing *children*, it is a process of re-shaping an old story according to current views concerning how a literary text for children *should* be written and illustrated. Last but not least, we can conclude that the contemporary adaptation we have examined is a literary work in which we can observe the workings of ideology: it is a process of re-shaping a story for adults of a remote past according to ideologies or models of a posterior generation. Like all adaptations of its kind, then, it can be read as a record of its contemporary context deflected, however, through the personal stance of its writer and its illustrator (Kalkani, 2004: 40). Moreover, it can be read as a paradigmatic text (both verbal and pictorial) which, permeated as it is with ideology, 'teaches' its readers how to view their world.

NOTES

1. Svetlin Vassilev is a Bulgarian painter living in Greece. He signs his works as "Svetlin" and he is one of the most distinguished illustrators of children's books in Greece.
2. There is a similar Aesopian fable entitled: "The Wolf and the Lambe Donkey".
3. For the function of anachronisms in the adaptations of the comedies of Aristophanes but also in adaptations for children in general, see Kalkani (2004: 91 – 93).
4. There is an interesting analysis of such cases in Greek literature for children, whereby the writer adapts the source text in a loose way but the illustrator remains faithful to the source text and not to the loose adaptation: See Kanatsouli (2005) Ideology in contemporary Greek picture books, *Children's Literature* 33, Hollins University.
5. According to John Stephens "the 'fool' [in fiction] functions to render problematic common social assumptions and presuppositions by blurring the borders between the serious and the comic, and between the 'reality' that is and the ideality which is constructed" (Stephens, 1992: 122).
6. 'Donkey' as well as 'wolf' are masculine nouns in Greek, which explains why the two animals are depicted as gentlemen. On the other hand, 'fox' is a feminine noun. Moreover, in the imagination of the Greeks the fox as a character in tales and fable symbolizes a sly woman. That is clearly reflected in the way the fox is depicted in the illustrations not only of the book we are examining but in all Greek books with fox fables or tales.
7. For the concept of "intertextuality" see Stephens (1992), Wilkie (1996), Zervou (1997), Stephens & McCallum (1998).

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