

BARBARA KACZYŃSKA ORCID: 0000-0003-0421-9205
University of Warsaw

Trickster in Children's Literature: Between Justification and Condemnation. The Case of the "Puss in Boots" Tale in Poland

Abstract: The article discusses the treatment of the trickster figure in the Polish tradition of the "Puss in Boots" tale addressed to children. The analysis of the texts by Antoni Józef Gliński (1853), an anonymous author (1912), Ewa Szelburg-Zarembina (1954), Hanna Januszewska (1968), Milena Kuztelska (2009), and Robert Jarosz (2015) shows that the tale is often inscribed within the value system meant for the moral education and socialization of children. Depending on the emphasis put on this didactic intention, the ambivalent character of the cat can be either justified and absorbed by the established moral order, or excluded from it and condemned.

Keywords: trickster in children's literature, Puss in Boots, Charles Perrault, fairy tale adaptation

"Trickster", an anthropological term first used by Daniel Brinton in his 1885 article about Algonquian beliefs (Szyjewski, 2020: 164), is a category commonly used in the study of mythologies and folktales to refer to characters who engage in trickery and deception (Fernandes, 2008: 992). As noted by Michael P. Carroll (1984: 105–107), the term is actually applied to various distinct types of characters, such as the "clever hero" who outwits stronger opponents, or the "selfish buffoon" whose "elaborate deceits", devised in order to satisfy "his enormous appetites for food and sex", often backfire and leave him "looking incredibly foolish". What seems to be true for all trickster types, however, is their propensity to subvert or violate the moral norms and social codes prevalent in a given community. The trickster, pitted against opponents boasting greater physical or social strength, contests or even destroys the established order. However, he¹ is amoral rather than immoral: the narration suspends ethical judgment of his transgressions for the sake of amusement and amazement at his craftiness.

¹ Male pronouns are used in the paper for the sake of brevity; incidentally, it is worth noting that male tricksters are more common than female ones.

Ambivalent by definition, he most often acts for self-serving reasons. Nevertheless, sometimes his deeds benefit the weak who have until now been disadvantaged, and allow for a new, better order to be created (in such a case, the trickster may become a culture hero). The attractiveness of this character type may lay in its direct connection to the basic condition of human being, who, while initially weak, learns to manipulate and master his environment and himself (Lüthi, 1987: 132). However, the trickster's transgressions, especially if they are limited to a playful narration in the carnivalesque convention of the *monde à rebours*, may actually serve to reinforce the established order. When the trickster outwits a powerful opponent, he exploits the existing system, but he rarely changes its nature. This "conservatism", so to speak, is characteristic of folk oral literature, created for and by the underprivileged, for whom witty mockery was the only imaginable – and always only temporary – form of retaliation against those in power (Darnton, 2012: 79).

While ubiquitous in myths and folktales, the trickster is often treated with unease, and thus erased, in contemporary mainstream written literature which tends to subscribe to a morality more complex than "end justifies the means", and "the weak deserve to beat the strong" (Robert, 1981: 66). Such literature is more likely to promote the prosocial values and moral ideals (honesty, integrity, generosity, and bravery), which the trickster spurns, and which are based on a notion of goodness more abstract than satisfaction of an individual's desires. This seems especially true if children's literature is considered. Since its very conception in the Age of Enlightenment, one of its most important functions has been the socialization and moral education of its audience (Żurkowski, 1989: 12). The amoral and ambivalent trickster hardly lends himself to such a goal².

Within children's literature, all traditional fairy tales are often thought – particularly by laymen, and contrary to facts – to provide perfect lessons about the nature of and the strife between good and evil (Gil-Budzyńska, Kowalewska, 2014). However, due to fairy tales' kinship with more archaic myths and

² That is not to say that children's literature does not have ambivalent or transgressive characters. On the contrary, many of the acclaimed children's books from the last century make good use of trickster figures. What is discussed here is a general tendency, confirmed by professional and non-professional discourse on children's literature. It is also worth noting that while some characters in children's literature exhibit trickster-like qualities, the latter are often mitigated by more traditional moral virtues: for example, Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking certainly violates social codes, but she conforms to higher standards of generosity, probity, and bravery. Francesca Simon's Horrid Henry may be closer to the trickster ideal (alternately as a clever hero and a selfish buffoon), but even his behaviour never transgresses certain boundaries (for example, Henry always goes to his room when his parents tell him to do so). Finally, Jan Brzechwa's Cheating Flea (Pchła Szachrajka), when put on trial after a life of playful deceit, promises to never lie again, and although her conversion to decency is presented in a tongue-in-cheek manner, it nevertheless brings the character in line with conventional morality.

folktales, as well as their original adult audience, their moral message is sometimes less obvious and less innocent than is commonly perceived. Such is the case of "Puss in Boots"³.

Maitre Chat, ou le Chat botté, published in 1697 and most often attributed to the academic Charles Perrault, while based on Italian tales by Giovanfrancesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile, is usually deemed the canonical *textus princeps* and the foundation of later tradition. It was Perrault who first shifted the focus of the narration from the human protagonist to his animal helper, as evidenced by the tale's title: *le maître chat*, or the master cat, is much more important than the cat's master. It is the former's foresight and skillful manipulation of signs and appearances that is at the center of reader's attention (Sermain, 2005: 192). All of the cat's actions aim to transform the reality so that it conforms to his words. Even his offer of help given to the young miller's son at the very beginning of the tale may be read as a deceit that he uses in order to avoid the ultimate desubjectifying aggression: being eaten by his master and having his skin turned into a muff (Marin, 1978: 123; Eichel-Lojkine, 2013: 251). To escape this horrible fate of being turned into food and clothing, the cat does not shy away from physical violence, but his principal *modus operandi* is deception and cajolery. He traps a young rabbit, "poorly educated in this world's ruses", and kills it "mercilessly"⁴ (Perrault, 2005: 214). Offering the prey to the king, he presents it as a gift from his master, whom he calls a marquis, thus usurping the monarch's title-granting prerogative. In order to legitimize his subterfuge, he tells his master to strip naked, as a youth in peasant clothing will always be perceived as a peasant, but the same youth in the nude can be presented as a robbed nobleman. Having persuaded the king to dress the fake marquis in royal robes and to let him sit in the royal carriage, next to the royal daughter, the cat then seizes the surrounding lands by menacing their inhabitants: if they do not tell the king they are subjects of the marquis, he says, they will be chopped finely like meat for *pâté*. Their real lord, a vain and naïve ogre, provoked by the cat to confirm the rumors about his magical ability, transforms first into a fearsome lion, and then into a defenseless mouse. While he tries to prove his alleged authority, the ogre loses it completely when he is swiftly devoured by the cat. His ownerless estate can in turn serve to prove the alleged authority of the marquis. The king's and princess's gullibility, coupled with the former's propensity to drink, and the latter's lust, suffice to turn the miller's son into the heir to the throne, and the cat into a lord. Reality has been altered to fit the words that used to be lies; the initial promise of help has been fulfilled, and the king's credulous fiat has legitimized both the marquis's title, and the cat's boots. Indeed, this memorable

³ For the purposes of this article, *Puss in Boots* (in italics) is used as the title of specific texts, while the "Puss in Boots' tale" refers to the broader tradition or tale type.

⁴ "peu instruit encore des ruses de ce monde", "sans miséricorde". All translations in the text are mine. Original quotes from literary texts are provided in the footnotes.

and picaresque costume invented by Perrault alludes to the footwear that was once worn exclusively by noblemen going to the war. By donning boots, the cat has usurped a status to which he has had no right – at least, until the master’s social ascension has also ensured the advancement of his crafty servant (Morgan, 1987: 71).

The trickster cat’s success follows the logic of folktale ethics, which lets the underdog outwit the stronger opponent and triumph in the end⁵. However, despite the apparent simplicity and one-dimensionality of the tale, Perrault writes for the literate, privileged elites. Instead of being a model to be imitated, the trickster is construed as an imitation of a real-world phenomenon. As noted by Morgan (1985: 80, 151), Perrault’s choice of words, and particularly the versified morals that conclude the tale, provide disillusioned commentary about fraudulent upstarts’ slyness and ruthlessness (“industrie” and “savoir faire”, which were at the time derogatory terms – Perrault, 2005: 218), as well as the faulty nature of a society which invites its own demise because of its excessive trust in appearances on which it is built (“habit” and “mine” – Perrault, 2005: 218) (see also: Eichelt-Lojkine, 2013: 280; Trinquet, 2012: 187).

As time passed, and especially once the folktale and the literary fairy tale had been confined to children’s literature in the 18th and 19th centuries, Perrault’s social commentary became irrelevant and unnoticeable. The focus shifted to the joyful triumph of the weak and dispossessed over the powerful villain. The tale itself has been subject to uncountable adaptations, transformations and retellings (see Escarpit, 1985), both in French and in other languages, including Polish. The rest of this paper analyzes some Polish texts belonging to the “Puss in Boots” tradition, in the attempt to determine whether its absorption into children’s literature has affected the trickster’s portrayal, and whether the authors, wishing to educate and socialize their young readers, introduce the ethics of honesty with which the cat’s behavior is at odds.

The six texts⁶ selected for the analysis (five literary fairy tales and one theatrical play) are the product of three distinct periods in the history of Polish children’s literature: the second half of the 19th century, when the genre started to gather momentum; the communist period in the 20th century; and the most recent, 21st-century developments. The first four are cited in the Polish Folktale Dictionary (Wróblewska, 2018), which is why I have deemed them representative for the Polish “Puss in Boots” tradition. The two most recent works were chosen amid the plethora of available texts because of their interesting

⁵ Characteristic of many traditional narratives, this type of ethics represents the “ritual powers of the weak”, who “appear to symbolize the moral values of communitas as against the coercive power of supreme political rulers” and are “representatives or expressions of universal human values” (Turner, 1991: 110).

⁶ The use of terms “retelling” and “adaptation” is limited in this paper, so as not to put unnecessary stress on the relation of hypertextuality (as defined by Genette, 2014), which is difficult to establish in some cases.

treatment of the trickster figure. The analysis aims at exploring certain existing phenomena without suggesting that they are dominant in the contemporary "Puss in Boots" tradition, as it is evident that a different selection of texts may have yielded different results (for another overview of the subject, see Woźniak, 2009).

The oldest work discussed is *Baśń o księżciu na Gołoszyszkach Gołopiętskim i o jego kocie* [Tale of Prince Bare-Heels of Bare Hamlet and his cat⁷] by Antoni Józef Gliński, published in the third volume of his *Bajarz polski* [The Polish Storyteller, 1853], a collection which remained immensely popular until the beginning of the 20th century. Gliński's fairy tales, written in formulaic rhymed prose, were inspired mostly by Belarussian folktales and Russian literature. Indeed, the idea for "Prince Bare-Heels" was probably taken from Vasily Zhukovsky's rhymed adaptation of Perrault's tale (Krzyżanowski, 1961: 500). However, Gliński includes elements absent from any other version, such as the exuberant gifts that the cat offers the king. Instead of rabbits and partridges that he has trapped in a sack, Gliński's cat lures entire herds of hares, wolves, and bears into the king's garden, seducing them with tales of delicacies awaiting within. His trickery is not only much more spectacular, but also based exclusively on the mastery of language and persuasion skills. Lies, threats, and flatteries, deployed in order to avoid being eaten and skinned, let him secure the hand of the princess for his master. The cat himself is granted titles, orders, and a pair of red velvet boots, which are no longer a colorful symbol of his fervent activity and usurped status (Decourt, 1998: 104), but a sign of his newly acquired wealth and prestige; instead of being an instrument of trickery, they are its reward.

Gliński's cat, compensated for his deceitfulness, is joyfully amoral, but his actions are justified by the fact that he serves his master, who is even cited in the tale's title. Unlike Perrault's miller's son, who is remarkably bland and passive until he quite skillfully joins in the deception himself, Gliński's protagonist exhibits the highest virtue, repeatedly extolled by the author in other tales: charity. His poverty, which earns him the derisive nickname "Prince Bare-Heels", results not only from the unjust division of inheritance left by his father, but also from his generosity towards the destitute, widows, and orphans. Even when he ponders cooking and skinning his cat, he reflects that it would not help him in aiding the needy. In no way does his philanthropy influence the plot of the tale; nevertheless, it marks him as deserving of having his fate improved by the magical helper. The basic folktale ethics of the triumph of the weak is bolstered with the underdog's additional moral merit. Thus, the trickster cat is an agent of justice delivered to the oppressed and, more importantly, the worthy.

⁷ While "Gołoszyszki" was an actual village in the region which now belongs to Belarus, Gliński most likely used the name due to its association with *goły* 'bare, naked, destitute'.

A similar idealization of the miller's son can be found in anonymous *Mądry kot* [A Wise Cat, 1893]⁸, where it is coupled with the vilification of the antagonist. The earnest and honest youth is a gifted rat-catcher, aspiring soldier, and the best friend of his cat, whose actions are not motivated by the fear for his own hide, but by the love for his companion and master. Just like in Gliński's version, some of his trickster feats are quite spectacular, but also quite heroic: he hunts for legendary red rabbits in an impenetrable thorn forest, and lures no less mythical white partridges out of an inaccessible mountain valley. His extravagant attire (apart from red boots, he also sports a feathered hat and a golden chain) is explicitly said to invest him with prestige of the rank he pretends to possess, as they make people bow humbly before him. However, the bold lies he tells the king meet with a slight reproach from the cat's master, who fears just punishment (and thus confirms his respect for the established moral code).

The cat's deceits are justified not only by the spiritual excellence of the person they are meant to help, but also by the wickedness of the tale's villain. In Perrault's and Gliński's works, the shape-shifting opponent tricked into becoming a helpless mouse is given almost no characteristics, apart from the obvious negative connotations of the French word *ogre*, his magical abilities, his wealth, and his apparent vanity. His cruelty can only be read into Perrault's text if we interpret the peasants' susceptibility to the cat's threat of chopping them into pâté as a hint at the ogre's man-eating habits (Marin, 1978: 130). In Gliński's tale, even this suggestion of violence is absent, as the opponent is a wizard, and the cat's threat specifies that uncooperative peasants will be chopped by the king's guards (it seems that the monarch is a more feared power figure than a landlord who can transform into a lion).

The villain in *Mądry kot* is much more despicable: he is a giant evil wizard Kościej, a figure seemingly borrowed from Russian folklore (cf. Koschei the Deathless in Afanasyev's collection). In the analyzed text, Kościej "had turned many people into animals, battled the king himself, and did not fear his army because he would take away the soldiers' courage with magic and make them flee"⁹ (Anonymous, 1912: 25). In consequence, when the cat opposes and eliminates him, he does not violate the established hierarchy and social order; on the contrary, he aids the rightful monarch to restore his undermined authority. Interestingly, the wizard is not devoured after turning into a mouse. Instead of being annihilated, so that he can be smoothly supplanted by the cat and his master, his body, returned to its natural form after death, becomes a crucial

⁸ The 1912 edition consulted for the purposes of this paper is allegedly a reprint of a work first published in 1893.

⁹ "W zamku tym mieszkał bardzo zły czarownik, Kościej, który już wielu ludzi pozamieniał w zwierzęta, z samym królem wojował i nie bał się jego wojska, bo czarami odbierał żołnierzom odwagę i zmuszał ich do ucieczki".

proof of the miller's son heroic merit. The king's speech at the end of the tale is particularly telling:

Dear Prince Jaśkiewicz! I see that you are brave, since you have killed Kościej; hospitable and generous, since you have been sending me excellent game, and since you have received us today so magnificently; rich, since you own such beautiful fields, forests, and this enormous castle; as well as young, handsome, and polite¹⁰ ([Anczyc], 1912: 30).

While the miller's son's wealth is the result of mystification, he does possess all of the other qualities listed by the king, even if it is the cat who puts them to action. Most importantly, the king accepts the youth as his son-in-law not because of infatuation with the external traps of rank and because of gullibility intensified by indulgence in liquor, but in recognition of a very real service that has been rendered to him. The elevation of the miller's son proves beneficial for the entire realm, as the narrator assures us that he became "a good and just king"¹¹ (Anonymous, 1912: 31). Thus, the trickster is somewhat tamed and adapted to traditional moral standards: as questionable as his methods may be, the cat's intention to help his friend is laudable, and his actions serve to restore the order, not to subvert or overturn it.

To some extent, the two 19th-century texts discussed here rehabilitate the cat by idealizing his master, but his acts remain those of a sly and ruthless trickster. Even though children's literature of the period on the whole has been analyzed as autocratically didactic (Waxmund, 2000: 21), the didactization of "Puss in Boots" is relatively limited. This is, perhaps, the cause or effect (or both) of folktale and fairy tale not being fully accepted in Polish children's literature in the 19th century and early 20th century (Dygasiński, 1884: 10; Sempołowska, 1981; Starowiejska-Morstinowa, 1939: 158).

The preoccupation with moral education of children did not become less pronounced in mid-20th century. In communist Poland after the Second World War, this tendency overlapped with the desire to socialize young readers into exemplary citizens of the brave new world. For a time, folktales and fairy tales were criticized for propagating superstitions and pointless fantasies, as well as cruelty and deceitfulness (Osterloff, 1946; Librachowa, 1946/1947; Zawodniak, 1998: 84, 88–89). However, they were quickly restored to grace on the condition of their adaptation and purification. Violence was not permitted¹²,

¹⁰ "Kochany książę Jaśkiewczu! widzę, że jesteś dzielny, bo zabiłeś Kościeja; gościnnym i hojnym, bo przysyłałeś mi piękną zwierzynę i przyjąłeś nas dziś tak wspaniale; bogatym, bo posiadasz prześliczne pola, lasy i ten ogromny zamek; a na koniec młodym, przystojnym i grzecznym".

¹¹ "[...] dobrym i sprawiedliwym królem".

¹² "For many years, I worked at „Nasza Księgarnia” [one of the two publishing houses which published children's books during the communist period]. [...] We carefully chose and selected fairy tales, so that there was nothing terrible in them. Our selec-

and neither were deceptions. New literary fairy tales, officially based on folktales¹³, were supposed to emanate innocent optimism and lofty sense of justice, supposedly characteristic of the idealized folk: “It was the bourgeois literature that chose a rogue and a rascal for its hero [...]. The folk hero in general is simple and noble” (Żylińska, 1953).

In this context, the “Puss in Boots” tale became especially problematic, and particular care had to be taken when transmitting it to children, as evidenced by the recommendations found in two of the most important books on children’s literature published in 1950s:

When I was telling the amusing, but deeply immoral tale of “Puss in Boots”, the youngest girl, alarmed by the cat’s deceptions, asked: “Was he good?” [...] I dispelled the emotional girl’s doubts by saying that the cat loved [the miller’s son] and wanted to help him in this way, but he was in the wrong. Regardless of whether a child asked the question, which sped up the “correction” of the tale’s immoral elements, I usually “corrected” the hero’s character in the tale’s ending, making him reveal the cat’s deceit, and earn the king’s and the audience’s forgiveness (Wortman, 1958: 180–181).

The point is not that there must not be any envy and cunning in fairy tales, but that the person who has these flaws or feelings must not be a hero who is liked and treated with indulgence. That, however, was the case in many old fairy tales, in which layabouts and frauds were warmly admired and appreciated. Such fairy tales are in conflict with pedagogy, unless the feats of a figure such as Puss in Boots – who is one of the most charming fairy-tale characters – are presented as a joyful absurdity. The listener must not take the tale to heart; we need to laugh along with him at the amusing deceptions, making it clear, however, that we do not approve of them (Słońska, 1959: 86).

The path indicated by Wortman and Słońska had already been followed by the renowned author Ewa Szelburg-Zarembina in her collection *Kije samobije i inne baśnie* [Cudgel in the Sack and other tales, 1954]. The texts in the volume repeatedly condemn frauds and glorify honest work of the laboring class: for example, Szelburg-Zarembina’s Cinderella, instead of marrying an idle prince, prefers a shoemaker who knows his trade, and the princess on top of the glass mountain is rescued only when glassworkers build a magnificent glass city around her prison. In keeping with this moral and social message, *Baśń o kocie w butach* [Tale of Puss in Boots] insists on the miller’s son’s purity of heart. Unlike his materialistic older brothers, he values the cat’s company much higher than the inherited land and riches. The impeccable youth would never think of eating and skinning his servant, who, as a consequence, is not motivated by

tion of Grimms’ tales was based on a German edition, but the endings were changed” (Wortman, 1978: 228).

¹³ In 1949, the Ministry of Culture and Art went as far as to organize a writing contest with the aim of adapting folktales analyzed by Krzyżanowski (1947) for children. The winner was Hanna Januszewska, who later adapted Perrault’s fairy tales (Budnik, 2013).

fear, but by gratitude and recognition of the master's virtues: "I want to look after you because you are a good boy"¹⁴ (Szelburg-Zarembina, 1954: 27).

The cat's trickeries are fewer and less ruthless than in the tales by Perrault, Gliński, and the anonymous author of *Mądry kot*. The hunt for partridges is barely mentioned, and does not serve to demonstrate the cat's craftiness; neither does he threaten the peasants, who look at him with wonder rather than with fear or reverence inspired by the lordly attire. The impetuous wizard is easily provoked to turn into a mouse and finds his death in the cat's maw, but when the cunning servant offers the ownerless castle to his master, the honest miller's son protests:

I am not a prince who wears silver and gold [...] You want to do me a bad service, my friend cat! / There are people here who spent their lives working / for this wizard, who lived on their labor. / They will take everything. [...]. I don't want to trick people, even for gold. / I've listened to you long enough, I don't want any more deceptions. / I will work for both of us. Look, I have strong hands¹⁵ (Szelburg-Zarembina, 1954: 30).

The speech, steeped in the ethics of honesty, confirms the miller's son's uprightness and expresses a clear critical judgment of the trickster's methods. Additionally, it subtly modifies the portrayal of the defeated antagonist, who becomes a landowner exploiting the laboring class. While Perrault demonstrated how faulty social norms can be abused and subverted by ambitious frauds, and the anonymous author insisted on the restoration of a fair monarchical order, the miller's son in Szelburg-Zarembina's tale refuses advancement within the established system based on exploitation and deception. The announced redistribution of goods and willingness to work mark him as a hero of a new fairy tale, expressing the ideological concerns of socialism. However, Szelburg-Zarembina does not completely break the traditional fairy tale convention, as the miller's son does finally marry the princess – but it is his honesty that earns him her heart and hand.

The cat's actions, despite his good intentions and their fortunate consequences, are unequivocally condemned. The trickster, even one that is much less ruthless than Perrault's or Gliński's, must repent. Far from being rewarded with wealth and prestige, he becomes a nanny and storyteller for his master's children: "It is no sin to make up things in fairy tales, / and it makes children laugh"¹⁶ (Szelburg-Zarembina, 1954: 32). Untruth can only be tolerated

¹⁴ "Chcę się tobą opiekować, boś jest chłopiec dobry".

¹⁵ "Ja nie jestem księciem, który chadza w srebrze, w złocie. [...] Złą przysługę chcesz mi oddać, przyjacielu kocie! / Są tu ludzie, co stracili siły na robocie / w służbie tego czarownika, który żył z ich pracy. / Oni wezmą sobie wszystko. [...] nie chcę w błąd wprowadzać ludzi, choćby i za złoto. / Dosyć ciebie już słuchałem, oszustw nie chcę więcej, / Zapracuję na nas obu. Patrz, mam silne ręce".

¹⁶ "W bajkach zmyślać to nie grzech, / a dzieciakom z tego śmiech".

as fiction, which is why the cat's propensity for lies is channeled into harmless stories, told for the amusement of children. It is worth noting that when the tale was republished in the 1970s, the final illustration by Władysław Krusiewicz showed the cat sitting next to a cradle without his boots. Stripped of his picaresque attribute of the usurped worldly status, the trickster is fully domesticated and absorbed into the firmly established moral order.

Hanna Januszewska was much less radical in her *Kot w butach* [Puss in Boots, 1968]¹⁷. Unlike the authors discussed previously, she openly based her story on Perrault's; in fact, in 1961, she published the first complete Polish translation of Perrault's tales. However, it met with limited success, unlike the more loose adaptation published several years later and reissued multiple times up until the 2000s. Even though Perrault is credited as the author on the cover and the title page of the adaptation, the text itself has little to do with the French 17th-century tale, except for the general plot. Januszewska indulges in her own, cordial, jovial, and energetic style, filled with warm, innocent humor, and interspersed with short poems¹⁸.

It is precisely one of these verses that lets the cat expound his philosophy: "Against the games of fate, / the cat way / is not to bite nor hiss. // A smart type / prefers to sniff around, / to peek, to eavesdrop. // Very slowly, / very quietly, / retracting one's claws, // pussyfoot around, / purr a little bit / and climb upwards"¹⁹ (Perrault, 1971: 41). The mischief which the cat openly admits is playful rather than predatory. Gone is the violence that Januszewska might have deemed unpalatable in Perrault's text, such as the danger of being eaten and skinned, or the merciless killing of an inexperienced rabbit. However, the trickster never shies away from other deceits, and he has a particular charm that his earlier counterparts lack. His mastery of flattering conversation is emphasized in a dialogue with the princess, in which he persuades her to go on a ride to the mill – a ruse that later allows him to introduce his master, supposedly the marquis robbed by brigands.

Nevertheless, the cat's joyful deceptions come with a proviso that seems to be an answer to Słońska's recommendation quoted above. After the cat promises help, the miller's son remains skeptical: "He knew the tomcat well, and he also knew that he gets on in life not with honesty and courage, but rather with subterfuge and cunning, and since the miller's son was a decent boy, he didn't like it very much"²⁰ (Perrault, 1971: 42). His doubts are a reminder of moral

¹⁷ The tale was first published separately in 1968, and then included in a collection of tales adapted from Perrault in 1971.

¹⁸ See Woźniak (2010 and 2011) for a comparative discussion of Januszewska's translation and adaptation.

¹⁹ "Na gry losu / koci sposób / to nie gryźć, nie fukać. // Łeb co tęższy / woli węszyć, / podejrzeć, podsłuchać. // Pomalutku, / po cichutku, / ukrywszy pazury, // tu – pokluczyć, / tam – pomruczyć / i piąć się do góry".

²⁰ "Znał dobrze kocura i wiedział, że radzi sobie w życiu nie tyle otwartością i odwagą, co podstępem i sprytem, a młynarczyk był zacny chłopak i nie bardzo mu się to podobało".

qualities that the child reader is expected to value in real life; only with this rule in mind can he safely enjoy the trickster's feats. The miller's son distances himself from his servant's methods, which, together with later ignorance of the cat's plan, absolve him of being complicit in the deception, even though he benefits from it. By remaining passive and unaware of the cat's plans, he can remain "a decent boy", and his worthiness is confirmed when he manages his newly acquired possessions "skillfully, diligently, and fairly"²¹ (Perrault, 1971: 50).

It is also worth noting that the tale's ending emphasizes the cat's well-being rather than social ascent: instead of being a great lord who still hunts mice for entertainment, he "became fat like a dumpling, feasting on the leftovers from the king's table"²² (Perrault, 1971: 50). The trickster's portrayal is once again softened and imbued with homely humor. Still, when neighbors ask the miller's son how he gained his riches and titles, he tells them to talk to the cat, who – stroking his whiskers like a charming rogue that he is – responds that "a cat does things the cat way, and my master does them the human way"²³ (Perrault, 1971: 50). After the clear critical disclaimer at the beginning of the tale, the trickster (never too violent and motivated by good intentions) can be appreciated as a likable sybarite rascal whose very nature places him outside the traditional morality – but only as an amusing exception to the rule.

The works by Szelburg-Zarembina and Januszewska have both been imitated by other authors, albeit often with less talent. Januszewska's adaptation in particular has shaped (or skewed) the reception and perception of Perrault's tales in Poland, to the point where the original texts have long remained practically unknown²⁴. The "Puss in Boots" tale has been attributed to Perrault and published under his name; the actual authors, now called adaptors, are hidden in the small print on the copyright page. Frequently, the texts are uninspired clones of each other, and the cases in which authors engage in a deliberate discussion with earlier tradition are relatively few.

One such exception is the adaptation by Milena Kuztelska. Published under Perrault's name, her tales are conceived in direct opposition to his texts, which she deems too short, sparse, lacking in dialogues and diverse vocabulary, and absolutely inappropriate for modern children (Kuztelska, Otrębowska-

²¹ "[...] gospodarzył dzielnie, rzetelnie i sprawiedliwie dobrami po czarodzieju".

²² "[...] wypaś się jak kluska na resztkach z królewskiego stołu".

²³ "[...] kot postępuje po kociemu, a mój pan po ludzku".

²⁴ Two press articles seem particularly telling in this regard. The first one, a review of Januszewska's adaptation (Łukaszewicz 1984), praises Perrault for his warm humour, even though it is entirely the invention of Januszewska's, whose name the critic does not even mention. The other (Wach 2004) is an outraged critique of an edition of Perrault's *Paluszek* [Little Thumb]: the faithful translation is deemed "loose interpretation with macabre elements" by commentators familiar only with the bowdlerized adaptations by Januszewska and her imitators. Some later adaptations, boasting the name "Perrault" on their covers and title pages, are in fact based on Januszewska's text (although the debt is obviously never avowed).

-Piasecka, 2006). It is no surprise that her *Kot w butach* [Puss in Boots] is six times longer than the source text, and the trickster is even more tame than in Januszewska's version.

In a great number of tales belonging to the "Puss in Boots" tradition, including those analyzed above, the reader witnesses the cat's deeds as they happen, which gives the impression of the trickster's power of foresight and mastery of the situation. While it is rarely specified whether he devised all of his actions beforehand, the swiftness of reaction suggests either careful planning or excellent improvisation. This impression is much weaker in Kuztelska's adaptation due to the sheer length of descriptions and dialogues, as well as the cat's monologues in which he reveals his plans before they are enacted. For example, after seeing the evil wizard's castle for the first time,

[t]he cat pondered it for a moment, hummed under his breath, scratched himself once or twice behind the ear to get rid of fleas, and then muttered to himself in a firm voice:

Even if I lose my whiskers, / Jaśko [the miller's son] will be the lord of the castle.
/ I may even lose my claws here, / As long as Jaśko gets rich²⁵ (Perrault, 2009: 83).

The description and rhyming monologue not only slow down the action and, arguably, defuse the tension, but also show the cat to be of a contemplative nature. Scratching for fleas additionally affects the character's dignity. While it is true that in the texts by Perrault, the anonymous writer, and Szelburg-Zarembina, the cat momentarily becomes the butt of a joke when he displays extreme cowardice in front of the antagonist-turned-lion, he quickly recovers and returns to his usual fervent activity. Kuztelska is much more consistent in presenting the cat as a funny and adorable character. When he first arrives at the royal court, he is met with hearty laughter of the king and courtiers, amused by his small stature and grandiose statements. His subsequent knight-riding is a playful parody of the ceremony:

And so the cat was solemnly knighted to everyone's amusement. The king himself girded him with a leather belt which was actually an ornate collar belonging to his favorite greyhound (since they couldn't find anything smaller), and presented him a small sword with which he had played war games when he'd been a young boy.

"Hurrah! Vivat!" they all cried, as they had already grown to like the tomcat, and had got used to his sayings and jokes with which he sometimes outshined the jester himself²⁶ (Perrault, 2009: 71).

²⁵ "Podumał kot chwilę, pomruczał pod nosem, drapnął łapą raz i drugi za uchem, by pcheł się pozbyć, a potem zamruczał do siebie, a w jego głosie dźwięczała stanowczość: / Choćby mi miały wypaść wąsiska, / Stanie się Jaśko panem zamczyska. / Nawet pazury mogą tu stracić, / Byle się tylko Jaśko wzbogacił".

²⁶ "Tak oto kot został uroczycie pasowany na rycerza ku ogólne uciesze. Sam król opa-

The final comparison to the court fool is particularly significant. While the cat does ascend to the royal court, he does so as a figure that, by definition, is not taken seriously. Similarly to Szelburg-Zarembina's storyteller, Kuztelska's jester poses no threat to the established order, as untruths told by both of these figures are safely enclosed within the convention of amusing fiction. While it would be excessive to say that the cat is mocked in Kuztelska's tale, there is no doubt that the trickster's predatory nature and subversive qualities are obscured for the sake of harmless – if rather bland – entertainment. Another, more obvious similarity to Szelburg-Zarembina's "domestication" of the character is discernible in the ending of Kuztelska's tale, when the cat happily anticipates the birth of his master's first baby, himself "bouncing on the chair like a child"²⁷ (Perrault, 2009: 90). Infantilized and family-oriented, the trickster is subdued and confined within the social and moral norms.

He is never violent, as even the rabbit that he has trapped becomes the princess's pet rather than the king's meal. What is more, Kuztelska arms the cat with good intentions and rallies him to the cause of proper social order by vilifying his final antagonist in an even more pronounced way than the author of *Mądry kot*. The wizard who replaces Perrault's ogre is first described by his miserable subjects. The peasants, who are the first characters in the tale impressed by the cat's lordly attire, lament their sad fate in an archaic style reminiscent of 19th-century literature of purpose:

"Forgive our boldness. We are simple people, not used to the ways of the great world. [...] We serve the count. He is an evil and cruel man, with no pity or mercy for us. He's also said to dabble in magic and to have signed a pact with the devil himself..."

"He's some sort of a werewolf!" screeched a fat beldam on the side²⁸ (Perrault, 2009: 81).

Moved by the peasants' complaints, the cat persuades them to tell the king they are subjects of the miller's son; instead of threatening them, he gives a heartfelt promise of a swift delivery from their evil lord. He does not question the hierarchy itself, but its perversion, which he plans to correct by supplanting the cruel wizard with the benevolent miller's son. Instead of abusing and

sał go skórzanym pasem, który w rzeczywistości był ozdobną obrozą jego ulubionego charta (nie znaleziono bowiem nic mniejszego), i wręczył mu małą szpadę, którą kiedyś bawił się w wojnę, gdy był jeszcze małym chłopcem.

– Niech żyje! Wiwat! – krzyknęli zebrani, bo zdążyli już polubić kocura i przyzwyczaili się do jego powiedzonek i żarcików, którymi nieraz przyćmiewał samego błazena”.

²⁷ “– A nim roczek minie, piastunem królewskiego dziecięcia zostanę! – cieszył się, podskakując jak dziecko na krześle”.

²⁸ “Wybacz nam naszą śmiałość. Prości my ludzie, do wielkiego świata nieprzywykli. [...] Na służbie jesteśmy u pana hrabiego. Zły to i okrutny człowiek, nie ma dla nas litości ani miłosierdzia. Powiadają też, że się czarami zajmuje i z samym diabłem pakt podpisał...”.
– To jakiś wilkołak! – pisała z boku gruba babina”.

overturning the established order, Kuztelska's trickster restores it. As he works not only for the advancement of his master and for his own gain, but also for the betterment of the people's fate, his lies and tricks are justified by the greater good he achieves. To dispel all doubts as to the cat's moral standing, Kuztelska further vilifies the antagonist, who lives in a dark, overgrown castle, has an owl for a pet, and dines on frogs and snakes.

Finally, the trickster's portrayal is affected by the figure of his master, who in this case is presented as good and caring, but indecisive and scatter-brained. The cat provides the necessary impulse to action, allowing him to achieve his full potential. Kuztelska ends the tale with words of coaching wisdom: "There is nothing that can't be done if you want it very much. And if you know what you want"²⁹ (Perrault, 2009: 90). She thus echoes the psychoanalytical interpretations that have circulated since the second half of the 20th century. According to them, the function of the "Puss in Boots" tale is to increase the child's confidence and trust in his or her qualities which may not be immediately apparent. Paradoxically, the trickster's lies, instead of manipulating reality, serve to uncover the deeper, spiritual truth (Bettelheim, 1996: 32; Baluch, 2008: 60–61). This uplifting message, focused on a child's development, is the one that Kuztelska decided to emphasize in her tale. Ensuring the necessary stimulus for his master's internal growth provides another justification for the cat's actions, besides the restoration of proper social order which would be based on fair rule instead of exploitation and terror.

Interestingly enough, Kuztelska's text never questions the morality of the cat's actions, but perhaps it does not need to with the well-meaning pet who is more cute than cunning as its main character. The trickster figure, polished and padded with funny gestures and good intentions, has been rendered sufficiently harmless.

The last work to be discussed presents an entirely different solution. *Kot w butach* [Puss in Boots, 2015] is a theatrical play directed by Robert Jarosz and staged in children's theatre "Guliwer" in Warsaw³⁰. For the motto of his play, Jarosz chose a quote attributed to the Catholic priest and philosopher Józef Tischner: "Wisdom does not consist in cunning, but in the ability to stand by evident truths. One who has chosen a momentary illusion in order to make a profit will pass away together with the illusion" (*Kot w butach* 2015). From the very beginning of the play, the miller's son and the cat are clearly opposed and contrasted. The former is an obedient son who accepts the measly bequest offered by the dying father and leaves home in order to prevent his

²⁹ "Jak widać, nie ma rzeczy niemożliwych, których nie można by dokonać, jeśli się tego bardzo chce. I jeśli się wie, czego się chce".

³⁰ Jarosz had already staged a *Kot w butach* in Cracow in 2008. The reviews (Michalak, 2008, Foks, 2009) suggest that the script and stage design had then been different, but the moral message had remained the same. The 2015 staging was recorded on DVD and is available in the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw.

brothers from quarreling about the inheritance. The cat, on the other hand, is remarkably unlikable, as he sneers at the humdrum of everyday work, and swindles his master of his shoes in exchange for lunch. When the miller's son learns that the bread he has been given was stolen, he does not hesitate to call his servant a thief and a liar. The cat brutally responds: "You'll starve to death with this honesty of yours"³¹ (Jarosz, 2015). Equipped with a pair of red sneakers and gangster sunglasses, he presents himself as a free spirit who breaks the rules for his own profit and amusement. He is motivated mainly by his own desire for money and power.

The miller's son is humility incarnate, satisfied with building a campfire and frying the fish he has caught, and he refuses to listen to the trickster's schemes. The cat has to provoke him into making a bet before any action is possible. Cunning and malicious even towards his master, the trickster revels in his own treachery until he is exposed by the conscientious youth. "Enough, I am not a prince, my name is Julek and I'm from the mill"³², says the miller's son, to the dismay of a greedy king who hoped for a profitable marriage for his daughter (Jarosz, 2015). As the disappointed monarch orders the cat's execution, his master gives the ultimate proof of virtue by offering his own life instead. It is his noble and charitable spirit that saves him: the princess, until now reluctant to marry, falls in love with the youth and assures him that he no longer needs to pretend to be someone else.

As foreshadowed by the quote from Tischner, when the illusion has passed away, the same fate awaits the cat. When he returns to the mill with a bag of gold, planning to hire people to catch mice for him, he is haunted by the ghost of the old miller, who strips him of his wealth, shoes, and even the ability to speak. Jarosz's firm didactic intention and his focus on the child audience to whom he wishes to transmit a clear edifying message do not let him engage in amoral social commentary or in playful mischief. He places the tale within the serious and rigorous moral framework, in which the path to happiness is very narrow, and the end cannot justify the means. Indeed, the cat's goal is just as perverted as the methods he uses: motivated by excessive ambition to which he devotes all of his skills, he must lose them in the end. The trickster is not tamed and domesticated, but explicitly condemned.

The overview of six Polish "Puss in Boots" tales seems to confirm the expected wariness of authors of children's literature when faced with a traditional trickster figure. Various portrayals of the cat from the 19th to the 21st century include some common themes which can roughly be divided into two categories.

On the one hand, the traditional folktale ethics of "end justifying the means" and "the weak winning against the powerful" may be imbued with additional moral ideals: the end is undeniably noble, the weak miller's son is charitable,

³¹ "Z głodu zdechniesz z takiej uczciwości".

³² "Dość tego, nie jestem księciem, nazywam się Julek i jestem z młyna".

honest, and fair, and the powerful antagonist is a rebel or an exploiter. As the trickster's actions are thus justified, the character himself is adjusted to fit within the established moral norms that the authors wish to inculcate in children.

On the other hand, the trickster can be more or less drastically excluded from the moral system. In that case, he is relegated to the realm of fiction which provides entertainment instead of role models, or even punished and condemned. It is interesting to note that the second tendency seems to have appeared only in the 20th century. However, regardless of the methods used, an effort is made to keep the moral system based on inner merit and honesty relatively intact. Over the years, fairy tale for children has not become less didactic; on the contrary, authors try to make the didactic message as clear and coherent as possible, basing their choices on bowdlerized psychoanalysis (Kusztelska) or philosophical aphorism (Jarosz).

The treatment of the trickster figure in the Polish "Puss in Boots" tradition illustrates a broader paradox related to folktales and fairy tales. On the one hand, they are often considered as the ideal, "natural" children's literature. On the other hand, authors and critics alike have insisted on the necessity to adapt them – which in practice means purifying and didactizing them – in order to respond to the supposed needs of a child reader. As a genre associated with a clear ethical message and didactic function, the fairy tale for children must not be amoral or ambivalent like, for example, Perrault's tales. This only becomes a problem in the context of the contemporary practice of attributing loose adaptations of varying literary value to Perrault, ascribing him words he never wrote and messages he never intended³³. It could almost be said that authors and publishers themselves resemble Puss in Boots: in order to preserve the memory of the French writer or to exploit his heritage for relatively easy gain, as well as to educate children, they present their own texts as the ancient tales, sanctified with age and their author's academic title. The mystification is rarely exposed: reality conforms to the authors' claims, as their creations are recognized by the general public as Perrault's tales. Adaptations, for all intents and purposes, become the originals. One can only wish that all of the trickster authors exhibited the same charm and grace as Januszewska.

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³³ I have discussed this phenomenon in more detail elsewhere, in particular in my PhD dissertation and in Kaczyńska (2019).

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