

Arbeiten zur Literarischen Phantastik



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## The Myth of Cokaygne in Children's Literature

The Consuming and the Consumed Child

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# I. Introduction

When I was little, I dreamed of the land of plenty, in my primer it was called ‘Schlaraffenland’. I indulged in thoughts about rivers of milk and honey, little roasted pigs running around and telling you to eat them, the pancake-covered houses. It was probably something like ‘jouissance’, as I would read later on in Carolyn Daniel’s *Voracious Children*, since “reading a lavish and sensuous description of a feast may provide intense emotional satisfaction”, to which the “desire for the quantity, richness, and exoticism of the foods described” can only add (Daniel 78). Ironically, I was not a ‘good eater’ then, always leaving something on my plate. Still, the thought of the huge mountain of porridge you had to eat yourself through intrigued me a great deal, although to ask a blind person in order to get the direction was rather puzzling. It seemed somehow nonsensical and yet, did not change my longing to get to this heavenly place of indulgence.

This childhood memory still lingered on in my mind during my research in children’s literature. After all, the Anglo-Irish version of the German ‘Schlaraffenland’, “The Land of Cokaygne”, does not seem to have anything in common with stories of child-like imagination at all, being an anti-clerical satire with only a relatively small amount of lines dedicated to the description of a land of plenty. However, the connection between Cokaygne and children’s literature seems to be recognised already in a fair amount of literature, sometimes only as a single comment and quite often rather derogatorily, such as Pleij’s remark about Cokaygne being nothing more than “a fairy-tale candyland for today’s toddlers” (Pleij 6). Especially the German ‘Schlaraffenland’ hints clearly at a child-related topic, since it is primarily known as a fairy tale, recorded and written down by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm. The search for secondary literature even revealed several books which turned out to be cookbooks for children, such as *Im Schlaraffenland* and *Alice im Schlaraffenland*, a highly aesthetically illustrated cookbook with curious recipes related to Lewis Carroll’s novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Accordingly, throughout Europe, the myth of the imaginative place suggests two things, which all versions seem to have in common in relation to a tradition, which was coined by Michail Bakhtin as carnivalesque: the rules of real life are turned upside down and an endless supply of consumer’s goods is provided, predominantly of course food.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Since the English spelling of the author Mikhail Bakhtin is different from the German spelling, I am going to refer to the English variant throughout the book despite using a German source and therefore referencing the German spelling ‘Bachtin’ for in-text-citations.

The term 'carnavalesque', which includes "masquerade, inverted social and sexual roles, [. . .] mock-hierarchies and topsy-turvy codes of license and revelry", still gives only a relatively small picture of the vast dimensions to which it is applicable (Rammel 74). According to Kuczynski, the notion of the land of plenty is also used metaphorically for a world of reversal and lies, grotesque exaggeration and nonsense or is simply adopted as a medium in order to criticize the vices of all classes (cf. *Schlaraffenland* 26). Therefore, the nonsense of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear during the Victorian era might be connected to a certain extent to the carnivalesque, even though mere nonsense does not automatically qualify as a signifier for the carnivalesque. Thus, looking more closely at Cokaygne, the principle of reversal appears to be as significant as the notion of abundance, even though the latter motif is imprinted on the memory of the general public to such an extent, that especially the Dutch 'Luilekkerland' and German 'Schlaraffenland' are used as synonyms for good and refined cookery and thus again emphasize a direct association to food. On the basis of the Bakhtinian coinage of 'carnavalesque', I am going to apply the term 'Cokaygnesque' throughout my book as a reference to the spirit and imagery comprising the Land of Cokaygne.

This book attempts to investigate the significance of the myth of Cokaygne in children's literature from the nineteenth century onwards, from the first golden age of children's literature in the 1860s up to more contemporary portrayals of the land of plenty. Why is the motif of food and indulgence such a prominent feature in children's literature? By looking more closely at classical children's literature, such as novels by Edith Nesbit or Enid Blyton, a vast amount of scenes are revealed in which food is to be obtained, lacking or devoured. Moreover, by observing the different ages of texts written for children, distinctive features regarding the socio-cultural environment of the texts in relation to several motifs of a cornucopia can be recognized. Accordingly, I am going to give relevant historical background to the time of publication of these texts and add a psychoanalytical approach in order to tackle the recurring motif of a cornucopia of food encountered in children's literature and fairy tales for several centuries. The main part of my book thus consists of the different forms of the Land of Cokaygne in children's literature, which all have the theme of food in abundance in common. The first and foremost variant of the Cokaygnesque imagination is what I have called the 'Domestic Cokaygne'. This form does not necessarily contain the Utopian connection per se, but rather comprises an excessive and seemingly endless amount of food within the domestic sphere. The abundance of food in this section in fact verges on Cokaygnesque dimensions and does not only centre on the feasting itself, which again forms a link to the carnivalesque, but on the listing of various dishes up to ridiculous degrees.

The interesting part of this form is not only a commitment to the sheer listing of food, but also the connection to historical conditions during the gradual establishment of Victorian children's literature, since the abundance of rich food was only enjoyed by adults of the middle and upper classes and not obtainable for the common child due to a meagre diet, let alone for the working class. Later on, luxurious food items were restricted to everyone in the war and post-war years of the twentieth century, which is also reflected in cookery books published during this period. The second section of my book describes 'Never-ending Food', which distinguishes itself from the other forms of a cornucopia due to it being merely one dish magically reproducing itself. This fantasy is very prominent in fairy tales, not only as a single dish, but also in relation to "all Magic Tables" and "the Magic Lamp", whose roots Ernst Bloch sees in the Land of Cokaygne as a "fairy tale of an ideal state, [only] simpler in its wares" (357). These images in fairy tales are of course closely linked to times of famine, in which the kind of food present was not of overall importance, but the quantity in order to keep from starvation and provide enough food for the family. The third form is the land of plenty itself, transferred to the genre of children's literature, which not only occurs as an enclosed space with a landscape comprising of food, but also as a story within the story, where Cokaygne, usually marked as the land of idleness, predominantly serves a didactic purpose. Although this last category addresses the Land of Cokaygne as an enclosed space similar to the preceding variant, the story within the story serves a function for the child audience in the text, conveying a certain message with often quite moralizing content. Of course these variants can only provide a basis, which would have to be analysed on a broader scale in order to grasp their development and impact on children's literature. However, this book does not plead completeness, but rather an overview in order to demonstrate the persistence and significance of the Cokayguesque motif within the field of children's literature. Accordingly, these different forms of abundance merely exemplify a continuance of the Cokayguesque tradition in the realms of children's literature.

In contrast to the motif of food in abundance, this book also attempts to link the peculiar notions of cannibalism with the imagined cornucopia in children's literature, which coexist in quite a few texts. This motif is not mentioned in the myth itself, unless roasted animals running around and shouting 'eat me' should provide an indication of that. Nevertheless, the myth of children being eaten seems to be inherent in human consciousness, reminding again of dearth, in which devouring your own children seemed to be the last resort and the biggest fear. This motif is not only taken up in myths and partly historically evident, but it is also present in fairy tales and later on in children's literature,

where the child is threatened to be consumed by predominantly supernatural forces. The motivation for including a cannibalistic aspect in this book is rooted in the reference of children in culinary terms in a variety of plots and certainly also in the amount of children providing for a feast by being personified as a land of plenty. The idea of nourishing on children is even taken up in Jonathan Swift's satirical essay "A Modest Proposal", in which the myth is elevated to a political issue, suggesting to the Irish people to sell their children as food to the rich English in order to survive (cf. Swift 502-509). Within children's literature, Roald Dahl's novel *The BFG* (1982) provides an excellent example for these Cokaynesque dimensions in relation to cannibalistic practices, since the giants in the novel are travelling from Giant Country every night in order to devour children in our world. Consequently, this book does not only investigate the motif of the child in an environment of food in abundance, but also explores cannibalistic aspects of children's literature, in which children themselves are regarded as delicacies and thus, constitute a kind of Cokaygne themselves. With regard to the tradition of fairy tales, I am going to refer to British and German sources, with particular focus on the latter since the German tradition is considerably richer in that area owing to the collection of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. Moreover, a comparison to the German concept of 'Schlaraffenland' might be useful in order to set a contrast to the British Cokaygne, since the myth is commonly known in German culture as a synonym for a heavenly place, predominantly with regard to food, whereas the British Cokaygne seems to be known to academics of English literature at the most. Finally, I am going to relate the topic of the Land of Cokaygne in terms of today's society. Is the fantasy of food in abundance still relevant in the Western world, where we almost find Cokaynesque dimensions in our nearby supermarket? In relation to the function of the medieval land of plenty as a substitute for missing indispensable necessities and a sign of hope, the topic in today's society might be approached rather differently, where not the absence of food is problematic, but food and eating in general.