

Grandma, What Big Fears You Have! Cultural Femininity in Little Red Riding Hood

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Once upon a time, a girl in red strayed from the path. With so few details, it is immediately apparent who this girl is and the story about to follow. This is a tale older than literature, instantly recognizable, and still being retold and adapted for new audiences. This paper examines several retellings of the story of a girl wandering from the path from a post-structural perspective, that is, in the context of the times and places in which they were written, as well as the critical differences in these retellings. Each adaptation reveals important details about the society for which it was adapted, in particular their attitude towards women and concerns about the monster that prowls outside the boundaries of civilization. It is, after all, a cautionary tale.

One of the earliest recognizable, written variants of “Little Red Riding Hood” is an eleventh century poem attributed to Egbert of Liege titled “De Puella a Lupellis Seruata” or, “About a Girl Saved From Wolf Cubs.” The value of including this poem among the lineage of “Little Red Riding Hood” is questioned by many folklorists, Alan Dundes in particular. Dundes places higher value on the purely oral telling of this tale, claiming that written versions do not attend to “authentic oral versions of the tale which reveal important details not contained in either Perrault’s or the Grimms’ accounts” (Ziolkowski 552). What Dundes claims is that, in attempting to perhaps capitalize on the success of such versions as Perrault and Grimm, many authors do not give the oral retellings as much attention as they should and in the process lose many of the important details found within the story. He goes on to state that, “It is well to keep in mind that fairy tales are first and foremost an *oral* form. So from that point of view, any written version is suspect” (552). In his

folklore elitism and dismissal of these literary touchstones, Dundes unfortunately overlooks a critical bridge between the oral tales and their more modern, literary counterparts.

Egbert of Liege dedicates his poem to a schoolmate, and within his dedication discusses the basis of his poem in the oral tradition and explains his view of “oral tradition as a precious resource in teaching because it was once familiar from everyday speech in the native language and yet novel when written in the learned language” (557). Egbert acknowledges and appreciates the wisdom found in the adages of the common people and hopes that “if in some way the clear insights could be retained, they would make neglectful students into attentive listeners” (557). To call Egbert a collector of folklore, however, would be incorrect. He did record the common, oral traditions he encountered but he also placed on these stories his own theological twists. In this regard it is difficult to know exactly what portions of “De Puella a Lupellis Seruata” are from oral tradition and what portions are Egbert’s personal touches (560). This fact in no way disqualifies the poem from its place of importance within the Little Red Riding Hood lineage, after all “a folktale does not cease to be a folktale merely because it has been transferred and adapted from an oral to a written medium” (553). It simply means that it must be looked at within the context of the time in which it was written and for whom it was written.

Egbert’s work is different enough from more commonly retold versions that in order to fully understand the nuances it should be taken as a whole, rather than in pieces and excerpts:

What I have to relate, countryfolk can tell along
with me,
and it is not so much marvelous as it is quite
true to believe.
A certain man took up a girl from the sacred

font,
and gave her a tunic woven of red wool;
sacred Pentecost was [the day] of her baptism.
The girl, now five years old, goes out at sunrise,
footloose and heedless of her peril.
A wolf attacked her, went to its woodland lair,
took her as booty to its cubs, and left her to be
eaten. They approached her at once and, since
they were unable to harm her,
began, free from all their ferocity, to caress her
head. "Do not damage this tunic, mice," the
lispng little girl said,
"which my godfather gave me when he took me
from the font!"
God, their creator, soothes untame souls. (559)

The Christian influence is immediately apparent. Many folklorists argue that Egbert's poem has no relation to the modern thread of Little Red Riding Hood as, though it contains wolves and girls in red, it lacks many of the characteristics and motifs so readily recognized in other versions (562). This is shortsighted and, like Dundes, discounts a valuable piece of "Little Red Riding Hood" ancestry. Though admittedly light on many of the traditionally recognized motifs, Egbert's tale most certainly does contain several that he then gives a unique religious twist. The wolf that carries the little girl away is, in Egbert's original Latin, described as *lupus*, not *lupa* (563). That is, it is a male wolf taking the child back to the cubs, not a female. This word choice is intentional, and perhaps indicates that the wolf is indeed more than it seems. In keeping with the religious tone and imagery of Egbert's poem, it could be that the *lupus* is a representation of the devil. The hooded tunic the young girl wears then symbolizes the blood of Christ rather than a more Freudian interpretation of menstruation and puberty, or the

other religious association of sin and sexuality. Under this protection of the blood, the girl would be protected from evil and able to tame the untamed.

In regard to cultural femininity, this poem says very little either positive or negative. The little girl was likely an original part of the oral tradition Egbert drew his inspiration from, "otherwise Egbert would have been free to make the protagonist a little boy - surely a casting that would have made sense for his male audience, if they had not known the story with a girl as the protagonist beforehand" (560). Still, the little girl is secondary to the message Egbert seeks to communicate: that baptism under the blood of Christ has the ability to save children from the powers of evil. Unlike so many following versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," the color of the hood and tunic is a benefit rather than a target. Infant baptism was a critical sacrament in the Catholic Church, particularly in the Medieval age in which Egbert wrote. With infant mortality an unfortunate and frequent occurrence in Medieval life, focus on saving their souls from eternal damnation was essential (561). By dressing an older oral tradition in a newer, Christian cloak, Egbert sought to persuade peasants to bring their children to be baptized.

Another precursor to more modern retellings of "Little Red Riding Hood" is an undated story titled "The Story of Grandmother." Paul Delarue, one of the most well-versed authorities on the ancestry of "Little Red Riding Hood," collected "thirty-five oral versions of the tale...in fact part of a larger, more ambitious project, namely, the compilation of the first French tale type index" (Dundes 13). Of these thirty-five oral versions, "The Story of Grandmother" is one. This story is more familiar for modern readers and likely the version that directly influenced Perrault to pen his Mother Goose tale. There is very little set-up in this story—within two sentences the protagonist has already met the wolf. This wolf, whom the girl meets at a crossroads, is specifically meant to be a

werewolf—the word used in the story is *bzhou* which the source for the story likens to the French *garou* (15). This *bzhou* inquires if the little girl is taking the “Needles Road” or the “Pins Road” (15). This is right away a large departure from the commonly recognized plot of Perrault or Grimm’s “Little Red Riding Hood.” From this, it would appear as if the *bzhou* already knew where Grandmother lived, and his main concern was *how* the girl was getting there, not the end destination at all. These two paths, along with the meeting occurring at the crossroads, is a very important detail that reveals some of the intent behind this tale. Traditionally, crossroads are places of decision-making, places indicative of change, and, if one is not careful, a place to meet the devil.

The crossroads of this story hints at a transition from girlhood to adolescence, further solidified by the wolf’s question of the Needles Road or the Pins Road. At the time this story and others like it were circulating within the collective oral tradition, there was “an informal system of age-classes. The stages of a woman’s life were distinguished by the symbolism of pins and needles” (Douglas 4). The pin is easy to use and represents a temporary fastening whereas needles require skill and make more permanent fixtures. Needles also require threading, intimating the sexual imagery of a thread through the eye of the needle (4). The pin represents a continuation down the path of childhood, and the needle represents a transition to adulthood.

Contemporary listeners of this tale would have recognized these symbols and understood that this story was one of transition and “the sequence of roles that the female child will go through in her life” (4). Future literary versions of the “Little Red Riding Hood” tale omit this question and all references to pins and needles, eliminating the “framing cue for setting the stories in the ritualised passage of the female generations” (5). “The Story of Grandmother” also includes a scene, common in older oral traditions but omitted in later

literary ones, of the wolf tricking the protagonist into eating her grandmother's flesh and drinking her blood. This appalling act of cannibalism seems so out of place in a children's fable; however, it simply ties back into the description of ritual passage from child to adult and the "role transfers between generations of women" (5). Subsummation is a common theme throughout mythology and this tale is no different. The grandmother, who lives at the end of the Needles Road, has grown old, "too old to be able to thread a needle (in both senses)" (5). While an unknowing cannibal, the girl takes her grandmother into herself and assumes her experiences and her mantle of adulthood.

The most apparent aspect of the protagonist's sexual maturity in this tale is the strip tease, another detail often omitted from later literary versions. After consuming parts of her grandmother (and having a helpful cat point out that it was her grandmother she just ate), the wolf tells the girl to undress and come to bed (Delarue 15). The girl could be under no illusion that her grandmother was still alive, she would have known the order came straight from the wolf himself. She undresses for him, "each time she takes off a garment [she] asks the wolf where she should put it, which leads to an enigmatic or frankly menacing response from the ferocious animal" (Soriano 28). After stripping for the wolf, the girl then remarks on his various physical features: how hairy he is, how large his shoulders, how big his mouth—all hallmarks of sexualized masculinity. She addresses her observations to her grandmother, knowing full well by now her grandmother is dead (Delarue 16). It's almost as if she were teasing the wolf, flirting with him by playing along with the charade. There are clear sexual overtones to this exchange. Finally, the girl's salvation from the *bzou* comes not from a parent or heroic woodsman, but from her own wit and quick thinking. She asks to use the bathroom outside and, slipping the tether the wolf has tied around her, escapes to

her home. While the girl's "feminine body invites the sexual advances of the wolf; however, it is that same excessive body through which she frees herself" (Marshall 263).

Oral versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" akin to "The Story of Grandmother" are quite unlike Egbert's poem before it or the literary versions after that were inspired by it. This story embodies much of the ritual knowledge passed down through generations of women, informing them of and guiding them down the path towards sexual maturity. The details of this story, the overt sexuality and the cannibalism, seem indecent for children from modern standards. At the time these stories were circulating, however, standards—and life in general—were far different. Children were "raised in contact with the realities of existence, in the promiscuity of misery and ignorance" (Soriano 25). Life was hard and harsh; these were realities children would eventually have to face and sheltering them from it did little good in the long run. When the young girl sets off for her grandmother's house, her mother never warns her to stay on the path or not to talk to strangers. Her mother knows the path her daughter will take is one all young girls must walk at one time or another. The girl does meet danger on the path, tells the wolf where she is going and how she will get there, takes her clothes off for him, climbs into bed with him, and at no point is punished for impropriety of willfulness. The wolf, while representing ill-intentioned men, is merely used as a tool to further the young girl's development, and when the girl finds herself in over her head, she is allowed to return safe to her mother's home. In "The Story of Grandmother," no privilege is given to sexual innocence or obedience, reflecting the time in which this story was told and those for whom the story was intended.

Charles Perrault, better known as Mother Goose, based his 1697 "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" heavily on "The Story of Grandmother," while also remodeling it for a more modern,

literate audience. His is also one of two versions most familiar to English-speaking audiences. During this time, the fairy tale genre as it is known today took its shape from authors of the salons; Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy published the “first literary fairy tale of the French tradition in 1690” (Feat 217). Over a dozen authors, Perrault included but mostly women, continued in this new tradition of literary fairy tales from 1690-1715 (217). Women made this new literary space their domain, a place to foster their creative and intellectual development. This female-dominated space and genre was unusual; France was “the only country where ‘the written transcription of fairy tales was not totally controlled by men’” (217). These new female authors attempted to “reclaim the voice that society from Boileau to Perrault himself was hoping to suppress” (218). Perrault was vocally against the concept that women could have an intellectual life and higher education. In 1694 he penned the tale “Griselidis” in which Perrault mocks Parisian women for their supposed inability to control

[T]heir intellectual passions: they are excessive and irrational when it comes to intellectual topics...Their loss of self-control...in the public sphere, their excessive and frivolous activity, lead the prince to long for a “natural” woman, which, for him, equates to a young woman with no will of her own. (226)

This prince finds his ideal, obedient, submissive mate in Griselidis and says to her, “Il faudrait me jurer que vous n'aurez jamais / D'autre volonté que la mienne’ (‘You must swear to me that you will never have a will apart from my own’)” (226). This wish crops up again in fewer words in his story “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge,” reducing his young female protagonist to an impotent prop in her own story.

Though the young girl in question arrives at the same destination in both “The Story of Grandmother” and “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge,” Perrault’s interpretation arrives at a very different conclusion than “The Story of Grandmother” via a very different path. The young girl in this story is distinct from the rest; rather than a general child that on to which one might overlay oneself, this girl is “the prettiest that had ever been seen,” and doted on by both her mother and grandmother (Perrault 4). Her grandmother makes her a red hood—this is the first time since Egbert’s poem that the garment color bears mention in the story—that sets her further apart from the other village girls. This girl’s mother sends her off to her grandmother, as in “The Story of Grandmother,” without a warning against straying from the path or speaking with strangers. Along her way, the girl once again encounters a wolf—*le loup*, strictly a wolf, as opposed to *loup-garou*, a wolf hairier on the inside than out—and, “not knowing that it was dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf,” tells him where she is going (4). If it were not for the nearby woodcutters, the wolf would have devoured her instantly. This is the first introduction of the woodcutter into this story, and while he plays a generally small role in Perrault’s version, he is still integral. The mere presence of men in the area is enough to keep the young girl safe—for now. Instead, the wolf says he will meet her at her grandmother’s house, and the two go their separate ways. The girl never leaves the path, but she dallies by gathering nuts, chasing butterflies, and picking flowers—all of those “frivolous activities” Perrault referenced in “Griselidis.” The wolf once again arrives first at grandmother’s house and devours her. Perrault omits the act of cannibalism in his version, though when the young girl arrives, he still allows the wolf to invite the young girl into bed with him. The girl once again comments on the attributes of the wolf, exclaiming about his big arms which are all the better to embrace her with, and is ultimately devoured by the

wolf. There is no salvation for this story's little girl. Perrault concludes with an additional morality poem, belaboring an already obvious moral conclusion.

The ending of Perrault's tale seems truncated as opposed to other traditional oral tales where the girl is always saved, usually through her own cunning as in Perrault's source material. Perrault removes this redemption, meting out solely punishment to the protagonist. The tacked on moral poem that serves as a conclusion leaves nothing up to interpretation, whereas a good fairy tale should remain more ambiguous:

Good fairy tales have meaning on many levels; only the child can know which meanings are of significance to him at the moment. As he grows up, the child discovers new aspects of these well-known tales, and this gives him the conviction that he has indeed matured in understanding, since the same story now reveals so much more to him. (Bettelheim 171)

Perrault presents a story with a patriarchal agenda; he wishes to warn "pretty, courteous and well-bred" young girls how they should conduct themselves so as to avoid a similar fate (Perrault 6). The focus on the attractive, well-bred girl immediately makes it obvious that Perrault is writing for a different audience than his predecessors. This is no longer a story for common folk, but a literary fable for the bourgeoisie. His moral poem also warns of wolves of several types: wolves of the forest but also wolves of the city, those well-seeming gentlemen that follow girls in the streets and vie for their attention. Initially, this seems like a fine warning. However, Perrault places the blame for any ill that befalls a young girl who listens to strangers on the girl herself, and not the wolf that stalks her. Unlike the young girl in "The Story of

Grandmother” who uses her wit to escape a deadly situation, Perrault’s young girl

...makes no move to escape or fight back, either she is stupid or she wants to be seduced. In neither case is she a suitable figure to identify with. With these details Little Red Riding Hood is changed from a naïve, attractive young girl, who is induced to neglect Mother’s warnings and enjoy herself in what she consciously believes to be innocent ways, into nothing but a fallen woman. All previous allusions to puberty and the coming of age tale this once was has been removed, Perrault omits the crossroads, the Needles Road, the Pins Road, and with those all agency “Little Red Riding Hood” was given in previous versions. (Bettelheim 171)

Perrault transforms “a hopeful oral tale about the initiation of a young girl into a tragic one of violence in which the girl is blamed for her own violation” (Marshall 263). In this story, the punishment she receives is directly related to her behavior—or more accurately the behavior of others and her perceived complicity in that behavior.

On its own, Perrault’s “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge” is already a heavy-handed attempt at forcing a patriarchal morality on young women of good breeding. He not-so-subtly suggests that young women should stay close to the men they know can protect them, avoid frivolous activity, and never listen to not just wolves but also one’s own urges. Paired with the historical context in which it was written and the women Perrault wrote alongside, these messages seem even more patronizing and infantilizing. Perrault appropriated a female-dominated space and genre in order to “undercut the authorial status of his contemporary female fairy-tale

writers” (Feat 226). He has made the women of his story—the young girl, grandmother, and even the narrator Mother Goose—passive objects in his cautionary tale. Perrault’s “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge” sharply deviates from previous versions of the story; instead of allegorically communicating the stages a young girl passes through on her journey towards adolescence, Perrault “attempts to suppress the female authorial voice while pretending to praise a characterological one” (226).

Over a century after Perrault altered previously told folktales to craft his cautionary tale, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm gentrified the story almost out of recognition (Douglas 4). Despite fervent avowals that they were “reporting pure oral tradition as it fell from the lips of uneducated German peasants” the Grimms almost certainly did no such thing (Dundes 7). Their source of this tale was a particular French Huguenot named Marie Hassenpflug, lady-in-waiting for a divorced duchess. (8) This indicates a very likely direct relationship between Perrault’s tale and the one told by the Grimms, as Hassenpflug would certainly have heard the story given her rank and nationality. As fairy tales are a product of the time in which they are written and told as well as their creators, “the Grimms’ tales are the epitome of small-town middle-class central Germany, where the values of hard work, thrift, modesty, enterprise and orderliness are underpinned by a simple Protestant faith” (Blamires 149). Social changes to how children and their needs were perceived also led to the Grimm brothers taking their cautionary tale a step further than Perrault and creating a tale meant to educate children as well as frighten them (Shavit 145). Whereas in “The Story of Grandmother,” topics for children were indistinct from more adult matters, in nineteenth-century Germany the child “was seen as an entity distinct from the adult, with different needs and capabilities of understanding” (146). The Brothers Grimm discuss in the

introduction to the 1819 edition of their *Children's and Household Tales*, “the manner in which they made the stories more pure, truthful and just. In the process, they eliminated those passages which they thought would be harmful to children’s eyes” (Marshall 263). The Grimms’ “Rotkäppchen” is responsible for explicitly turning Little Red Riding Hood into a canonically “disobedient, helpless little girl” (Zipes 125). They are also, however, the first in several centuries to also give her the opportunity for redemption.

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s “Rotkäppchen,” also called “Little Red Cap,” starts on an already different note from its predecessors. The protagonist of this tale is described as “a sweet little maiden” and that anyone who “laid eyes upon her could not help but love her” (Grimm 8). Unlike the focus on breeding and pedigree in Perrault’s version or the nondescript girl in “The Story of Grandmother,” the Grimm’s protagonist is immediately set apart through her declared sweetness and maidenhood. This is a pure, innocent little girl with whom none could find fault. She is instructed by her mother to go visit her grandmother, however this time the mother sets out a specific warning to “be nice and good and don’t stray from the path” (9). The girl agrees, once again sets off on the path to her grandmothers, and once again encounters a wolf. As with Perrault, the Grimms’ little girl also “did not know what a wicket sort of animal he was and was not afraid of him” (9). This time it is not the threat of woodcutters that prevents the wolf from eating the little girl, but the wolf’s greed and his desire to catch both the girl and her grandmother. The wolf persuades the little maiden to stop and enjoy the beauty of nature around her, pointing out that she is so focused on her task that she fails to notice the beautiful flowers or the singing birds. Convinced, the girl ventures from the path to pick flowers and wanders into the forest, finding prettier flowers the deeper she goes. As with prior versions, the wolf arrives at Grandmother’s first and makes quick work of her. The

little girl, finally arriving, doesn't need to knock as in other tales—the door is already open. She thinks this is odd, but ignores any warning or instinct indicating something is amiss. Approaching her Grandmother's bed, she again observes her strange appearance and is again devoured by the wolf. The Grimms' tale doesn't end here, however; a huntsman who happens to be passing by stops in and, seeing the sleeping wolf, cuts him open thus saving the young girl and her grandmother. The girl then fills the sleeping wolf's stomach with rocks so that when he awakens and attempts to flee, he falls down and dies (8-10).

With this story, the Grimms have “created their own version to fit normalizing discourses about the girl. The Grimms add a mother, who warns her daughter not to stray from the path. Little Red ignores these instructions, gets devoured by the wolf, and is finally rescued by a benevolent woodsman” (Marshall 263). The mother equates keeping to the path and heeding her words with being nice and good, both seemingly desirable traits in a young girl. In characterizing their protagonist as a sweet maiden, the Grimms have also laid the groundwork for her later redemption. Had they said she was only sometimes sweet, or occasionally disobedient, or perhaps-- *was für ein Horror!*-- not even a maiden, they would have presented her as tainted from the start. Her salvation is in her innocence and her ability to be reformed. Unlike Perrault's little girl in his “Le Petite Chaperon Rouge,” Little Red Cap neither takes her clothes off once at Grandmother's nor climbs into bed with the wolf. Hers is not a sexual transgression, but rather one of simple disobedience. She “emerges from the wolf's stomach only after she learns that curiosity and independence are dangerous traits for a young girl to possess” (261). Little Red Cap experiences a “metaphorical rebirth, fully dressed of course,” now ready to be the obedient child she should have been before (264). If there was any question about the lesson

learned, she states it herself in the moral of the story, “Never again will you stray from the path by yourself and go into the forest where your mother has forbidden it” (Grimm 11). This perfectly embodies the purpose of a childhood cautionary tale, “Using intimidation, cautionary tales persuade children to obey the laws set down by parental authority, celebrating docility and conformity while discouraging curiosity and willfulness” (Marshall 262).

Jack Zipes excellently sums up the moral of Grimms’ tale as well as the social implications of the time in which the story was written:

But times had changed since Perrault, and the nineteenth-century moralists no longer argued for killing or burning heretics, especially not their own children. First they displayed the power of their authority in the form of the police, in this case the hunter gamekeeper, and then they set an example of punishment using a misfit or outsider from the lower classes—that is, the wolf. (125)

According to social expectations of the time, Little Red Riding Hood needed to be punished in order for a lesson to be learned, however the true example of punishment was reserved for the outsider, the wolf. As evidence of her repentance and rebirth, the young girl fills the wolf’s eviscerated body with stones so that when he awakens to flee, he falls and dies. In this tale the wolf is not simply a male outside of the village, but rather “symbolizes natural urges and social nonconformity. The real hero of the tale, the hunter-gamekeeper, is male governance” (126). It is not just men that must be punished for their interference in the lives of young girls, but rather wild, untamed urges as a whole; “Inner and outer nature must be brought under control,

otherwise chaos and destruction will reign” (124). The lesson behind the Grimms’ cautionary tale is obvious, and their story “privileges discourses of femininity that suggest obedience as an ideal characteristic for a girl” (Marshall 264). In society at this time, “Inner and outer nature must be brought under control, otherwise chaos and destruction will reign” (Zipes 124). In leaving the path to explore her own sensuality, the inner nature, and the pleasures to be had in nature, the outer nature, Little Red Riding Hood violated the bounds of acceptability.

Continuing ahead another one hundred years, Little Red Riding Hood makes her way to the big screen. Tex Avery, of Looney Tunes fame, began his wolf-and-the-showgirl cartoon pairing with Warner Brothers in 1937 and continued the series when he moved to MGM in 1942. He created six of these cartoons for MGM, spanning from “Red Hot Riding Hood” in 1943 to “Little Rural Riding Hood” in 1949 (Gains 54). One would think from the way Little Red Riding Hood is presented in these cartoons that they would have a good deal to say about how women were considered in wartime America, but they in fact have very little to say. The focus of this film is in fact the wolf—his desires, reactions, disappointments—and how they relate to the soldiers that were the target audience for this cartoon during the Second World War. Looking specifically at “Red Hot Riding Hood,” Avery utilizes cultural icons and stereotypes overly familiar to contemporary audiences in order to communicate a message of expectations, but also subverts that message into something more unexpected.

Avery’s cartoon opens with an extremely familiar narrative tale: Little Red Riding Hood skipping through the woods on her way to her grandmother’s house, the Big Bad Wolf lurking in the forest nearby. Breaking the fourth wall, the wolf demands that the narrator—and the audience as well—give him a newer, fresher narrative, and Little Red Riding Hood

and her grandmother agree. Cut to a new scene: the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street and the wolf still on the prowl. Grandma has been rehomed into a penthouse apartment and Little Red Riding Hood—now Red Hot Riding Hood—works the club scene. During her performance, the focus is on the wolf and his reactions. This scene is iconic in its cartoon reactions: he stiffens like an arrow at the sight of her, howls, (wolf) whistles, pants, hits himself on the head with a mallet, and his eyes enlarge and pop out of his head. After her song and dance, the wolf pulls Red over to his table and propositions her. She responds in her best Katherine Hepburn accent “You wolves are all the same, really you are. No, I’m terribly sorry, but you see I’m going over to my grandmother’s, she’s burning a little light in the window for me, really she is” (Red Hot Riding Hood 0:03:57-0:04:10). Not dissuaded, the wolf drops his American accent for a far more cultured, Charles Boyer-esque one, and attempts to bribe her to come away with him, promising furs and diamonds and other luxury items. As an answer, Red’s theatrical, Transatlantic accent falls away, she shouts “No!” and smashes a lamp over the disappointed wolf’s head. Red escapes the club in her red cape and flees to Grandmother’s penthouse with the wolf hot on her tail. The wolf arrives once again at Grandmother’s house first, and rather than finding a meek old lady, he finds a sexualized man-eater. Grandmother mimics the same cartoon reactions the wolf displayed earlier: stiffening at the sight of him, whistling, and bulging eyes. “At last! A wolf!” she cries. The pursuer now becomes the pursued, and the wolf makes a desperate escape from Grandma. Beaten and bruised, the cartoon ends with the wolf back at the club swearing that he was “through with women. Why I’ll kill myself before I even look at another babe” (Red Hot Riding Hood 0:06:40-47). He springs to attention though as Red takes the stage and, true to his promise, shoots himself in the head. Even in death though, the wolf’s ghost can help

but howl over Red (Red Hot Riding Hood).

There are quite a few obvious sexual associations with his reactions: stiffening of the body, enlarging and elongating eyes, a lolling and engorged tongue. Avery uses code switching to make the wolf's eyes in particular stand in for the physical manifestation of male desire, "As both signs share the connotation 'arousal,' theoretically they can be exchanged" (Gaines 61). He also utilizes commonly recognized stereotypes of the era as signs, letting visuals represent larger ideas surrounding sexuality. In the same way "the gangster in the lounging robe...has come to stand for a range of ideas about decadence and corruption, showgirl is a kind of stand-in for a whole set of ideas about sexuality" (56-7). Audiences in 1943 would have been very familiar with the contemporary symbols of sexuality that were used to create Red's appearance, "the décolletage of the chorus girl's costume, Mata Hari's heavy-lidded eyes, Betty Grable's flawless legs and poodle dog bangs and the new Technicolor vision of the fiery redhead" (54). Avery created a Frankenstein's monster of sex symbols, ones that even modern viewers are familiar with so that with one glance it is immediately obvious that Red is a caricature of an attractive woman. As previously stated, however, the focus of Avery's cartoon is not Red but the wolf; Red functions strictly as a sign and gets very little screen time.

The wolf in this story, like several previous versions, most certainly stands in for a human male. The first use of the term "wolf" as slang dates from approximately 1917, when it was used in reference to a particular aggressive homosexual male. By the 1930s, its use shifted and instead meant a "dangerous ladies' man" (62). By World War II, the term was given a more complimentary association and was used to mean a man that was particularly successful with women. The intended audience for this cartoon, the deployed men fighting the war abroad, would have seen this wolf as a representation of

masculinity and something to be encouraged. It was “essential for morale that men be assured of their virility. Remember that it is basic cultural premise that aggressiveness, the mark of a fighter, corresponds with a ‘healthy’ taste for the opposite sex” (59). The wolf’s reactions to Little Red Riding Hood’s appearance and actions reflects this virility and reinforces the heterosexual ideals of the time. In this way the spectacle of Red the showgirl and the wolf’s reactions “flattered males with an appetite for women, celebrating the theory of magnetic, irrepressible attraction of opposites. In another way, simultaneously, it snatched the pleasure out of the soldiers’ mouths, undercutting the ritual by breaking down and toying with the sacred components: looking, arousal, aggression” (59). These sacred components receive a reversal of convention; whereas the male is traditionally the one looking at the sexualized body of the female, becoming aroused, and then pursuing her with aggression, Avery shifts the action onto the spectator. At Grandmother’s house, the wolf now becomes the one being looked at, the one causing arousal in another, and the one being aggressively pursued. As with many cases of inversion, the results are comedic as they defy traditional expectations of gender and storytelling. By shifting the action on to the wolf, Avery “also pushes the essentially static showgirl to the point that she becomes superfluous” (57).

Avery’s “Red Hot Riding Hood” and the other films in the series served a useful purpose for the Army during World War Two. The Army needed to communicate to the men that their virility, aggression, and attraction to the opposite sex was natural and encouraged in a fighter. They also had to communicate that these urges should be kept in check and redirected into appropriate outlets while serving overseas. “Red Hot Riding Hood” accomplished both of these goals “in that it resolved the opposite expectations that the soldiers be both continent and virile” (66). The “idea of looking at the

girl confirmed his maleness, along with everybody else's and insured his fighting spirit" (66). By inverting the traditional expectations of the wolf's behavior and the behavior of those around him, however, the subversive message of the cartoon "is that the substitute for sexual satisfaction is an unsatisfactory situation, the search for which is futile, and the guys who go after it just get more frustrated" (66). The message of this story is not that Little Red Riding Hood should keep to the path and avoid involvement with strangers, but that the Wolf, and by extension the soldiers he represents, should keep to the behaviors expected of them.

With the 1960s came the second wave of feminism and with it, feminist literary criticism. This new criticism was concerned with the representation of women's condition within literature, in particular the depiction of fictional female characters (Snowden 84). What better place to start retaking traditionally male-dominated spaces than to begin a new chapter of fairy tales? Angela Carter does just that with her collection of stories in "The Bloody Chamber" and its film adaptation *The Company of Wolves*, which she co-wrote with director Neil Jordan. Carter makes use of her audience's familiarity with "the structures and expectations of fairy tales...what makes them so readily recognizable. The existing canon indicates a central fact about the study of fairy tales: we cannot help but know what a fairy tale is before we know what a fairy tale is" (163). This deep cultural knowledge makes the fairy tale the perfect medium for a new, feminist cultural pedagogy. The framework is already set deeply into cultural subconscious, so much so that what is hung on top of the framework is infinitely malleable. Carter elects to address the "complexities of female desire and sexuality within patriarchal contexts" against the framework of the very traditional story of "Little Red Riding Hood" (169).

Carter and Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* draws its source material from three chapters of Carter's "The Bloody

Chamber.” These chapters are independent short stories based around the centralized idea of the girl and the wolf and are woven together in the plot of *The Company of Wolves*. The protagonist of the film, Rosaleen, is asleep throughout the whole movie; each of Carter’s short stories becomes an aspect of Rosaleen’s dream. In this way the story threads do not necessarily have to be cohesive, the purpose of the narrative is not the plot itself but the overall ideas about young women and emerging sexuality. In Rosaleen’s dream, she becomes Little Red Riding Hood after she is gifted her red cloak by her grandmother after the death of her older sister at the hands of a wolf. As her family buries her sister, Rosaleen’s grandmother remarks, “Your only sister, all alone in the woods and nobody there to save her” (Company 0:11:50). Rosaleen in turn asks her grandmother, “Why couldn’t she save herself?” (0:11:56) She goes to stay with her grandmother after her sister’s death; on the way to Grandmother’s house she tells Rosaleen, "Once you stray from the path, you're lost entirely...It's something you'll have to learn, otherwise you'll end up like your poor dear sister" (0:13:20-39). Grandmother frequently imparts this coming-of-age wisdom to her granddaughter, though Rosaleen seldom understands or appreciates the warnings. She tells Rosaleen,

A wolf may be more than he seems. He may come in many disguises. the wolf that ate your sister was hairy on the outside, but when she died, she went straight to heaven. The worst kind of wolves are hairy on the inside, and when they bite you, they drag you with them to hell. (0:15:12-34)

To drive this idea home, she then proceeds to tell her a story of a woman who unknowingly married a werewolf. There are many stories told within this film, harkening back to the oral

traditions of the fairy tales it draws from.

Back in her village, Rosaleen speaks with her mother about sex and what her grandmother has told her about them. Rosaleen's mother tells her not to mind her grandmother so much and that "if there's a beast in men, it makes its match in women too" (0:36:21- 23). This is a far cry from the warnings Little Red Riding Hood's mother gave her in the Grimms' story, rather it acknowledges the similar nature of both genders and restores agency to the women of the tale. Rosaleen is then courted by an amorous boy in the village; encouraged by both sets of parents, he asks Rosaleen to walk with him in the woods, assuring her they "won't stray from the path" (0:37:17). After Sunday church, she and the boy go for a walk in the woods where the boy goads her into kissing him; she is at best underwhelmed and abandons him in the woods to climb a tree. At the top of an impossibly tall tree, Rosaleen finds a stork nest with eggs, a mirror, and red lipstick in it. The eggs crack, and inside each is a stone baby. She returns to the village to find chaos: a wolf has killed a heifer and her family has assumed the boy "led [their] only daughter to the mouth of a wolf" (0:50: 46). Her parents are overjoyed to see her safe return, and she offers her mother the stone baby. Later, the men of the village go out to hunt the wolf killing their livestock and Rosaleen starts to develop her own fairy tales and tell them to her mother. Her tale differs greatly from those of her grandmother's; in this story the ill-used woman that strayed from the path exacts her revenge on those who used her so poorly and, turning them into wolves, forces them to sing to her and her baby at night. Rosaleen's mother is shocked and asks her where the pleasure would be in having wolves serenade her, Rosaleen answers that "the pleasure would come from knowing the power that she had" (1:01:18).

Finally, two-thirds into the film, Rosaleen is sent to her grandmother's house with a basket of food. She slips a knife

into the basket for protection and leaves with a warning from her mother not to stray. The amorous boy attempts to follow her into the woods to protect her, but once again she gives him the slip. She is alone in the woods, but not for long. From nowhere, she runs into a dapper, finely dressed huntsman who manages to disarm her—and take the knife away as well. The two have a picnic in the woods with the items from her basket and Rosaleen plays into the huntsman’s advances, calling the village boys clowns. After a flirtatious roll around on the forest floor, the huntsman bets Rosaleen anything she likes that he can arrive first at Granny’s house using his compass to navigate through the country while she can “trudge along the dreary path” (1:12:19). As expected from this fairy tale, the huntsman arrives first to Granny’s house. He enters under the pretense of being Rosaleen, but once inside Granny instantly recognizes him for what he really is, telling him to “Get thee back to hell from which you came” (1:14:38). “I don’t come from hell,” says the huntsman, “I came from the forest” (1:14:40-42). Granny attacks the huntsman, who begins to betray that he is in fact hairy on the inside, and he hits her on the side of the head, sending it flying off into the mantle where it shatters like porcelain. Rosaleen arrives at the cottage, realizes her grandmother is dead and that the huntsman is a werewolf—though, her lack of surprise seems to indicate she’s known this for longer. The wolf asks, “Are you very much afraid?” but Rosaleen answers that it “wouldn’t do much good for [her] to be afraid, would it?” (1:17:47) The wolf has Rosaleen burn her cloak, and after failing to shoot him with his own gun, asks him questions about his Otherness, his dwelling in the spaces between man and wolf. She asks him, “Are you only a man when you dress like one? Like Granny said?” (1:20:16-19) To prove Granny wrong, the wolf takes his shirt off, a reversal of which character is often unclothed at this point in the fairy tale. The wolf claims his kiss as the reward

for arriving at Granny's first, during which Rosaleen exclaims what big teeth you have. The wolf says they are for eating her, and she shoots him in the shoulder which triggers his transformation into wolf. She pities the wolf, not having known that wolves could cry, and tells him another fairy tale of a wounded wolf. The village, Rosaleen's parents included, approach the cottage, causing the wolf to flee through the window. They enter, only to find another wolf but no human daughter. Rosaleen's mother recognizes that she is the wolf and stops her from being shot, allowing Rosaleen to escape and join her new mate. The wolves race through the woods, coming closer and closer to a sleeping, real-world Rosaleen, stampeding through the decaying remains of her home. Howling at her bedroom door, they crash through the window, sending her toys and dolls to the floor, and Rosaleen wakes, screaming.

There is a tremendous amount to unpack in this film. It is laden with symbols, implication, and revision of traditional expectations. Both Angela Carter through her stories and Neil Jordan through his additions "disrupt the traditional rites of passage for young women often found in family- and marriage-centered fairy tales" (Snowden 167). They achieve this end through Rosaleen's relationships and interactions with the men she comes in contact with as well as her mother. Traditional expectation dictates that she would marry one of her peers from the village, however after trying one of these boys and finding him lacking,

[she] rejects the traditional courtship rituals and, instead, acts on her own desires with the hunter/werewolf. And, at the same time, she challenges the assumption that her rite of passage requires severing the bond between mother and daughter. (167)

This results in a narrative which gives Rosaleen the ability to make her own decisions, all with her mother's blessing. She is given the ability to recognize and act on other options, "Traditional rites of passage do not define her coming of age; she defines it" (171). Rosaleen does a lot of story writing in this film—both her own and the ones she tells others. The fairy tales she tells her mother and the wolf differ greatly from the ones she hears from her grandmother. Her Granny's tales are ones of traditional roles and expectations, the stories she tells "invokes women who stray from the path and are comfortable in the forest, who are kin to the wolves, recognizing themselves in these animals' otherness" (171). Oral tradition is strongly linked to matrilineal inheritance, and through creating her own stories Rosaleen assumes this mantle of oral tradition, passing on stories of her own creation. The stone baby inside the stork egg seems a very strange thing for a girl to find in the woods, but as avatar represents the endurance of the bond between Rosaleen and her mother. She finds this baby after rejecting the village boy's advances, and with it the accepted path to marriage, but before embarking on her journey where she encounters the wolf. By giving this baby to her mother, she is symbolically "turning in" her childhood to her mother in order to assume a new role in adolescence while still maintaining a link to her family home. Like the girl in "The Story of Grandmother," Rosaleen still has the ability to return home if things go awry in the forest (172).

As with the other little girls in red from other tales, Rosaleen far less afraid of the wolf she encounters than one might think a young girl should. Unlike these other girls, however, Rosaleen's fearlessness stems from curiosity rather than ignorance. At first, she "plays along with [the wolf's] seduction, enjoying the game, exploring her feelings with a mixture of naivety and boldness that keeps the viewer guessing about her knowledge and experience" (173). She

appears to be aware of her part in this dance with the wolf and enjoys the power she has to be both coy and coquettish. When she arrives at Granny's house, she is immediately aware that something is wrong, yet continues regardless. She takes the presence of the wolf as a challenge, shrugging off her fear the way she shrugs off her red cloak; "she understands the power of her sexuality, not as an object of male desire but something pleasurable to her" (173). The sexuality in Perrault and Grimm is found in the wolf, the young girl is simply the object of his desire, whereas in "The Story of Grandmother" the girl has similar agency to Rosaleen. Neither the young girl in "The Story of Grandmother" nor Rosaleen "use [their] sexuality to tame the beast or lull him into a false sense of security and escape. Instead, she discovers the pleasure in controlling her own desire and, in doing so, frees herself from male dominance" (174). Similarly, as with *Red Hot Riding Hood*, this scene plays with the "woman-as-object/man-as-viewer dichotomy" (174). Whereas in *Red Hot Riding Hood* the subversion happens when the wolf is suddenly the object of the grandmother's desire, the subversion in *The Company of Wolves* is expressed in Rosaleen's "pleasure and her somewhat naïve and experimental approach to sexual agency and autonomy" (174). This subversion allows for "an interpretation of desire that falls outside the male perspective" (174). Rosaleen is allowed to have control over her own body, sexuality, desire and safety.

The ending of Carter and Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* can appear problematic, contradicting the messages from earlier in the film. Rosaleen has explored her sexuality and achieved a coming-of-age on her own terms, yet the final scene appears almost as punishment. Rosaleen's dreams begin to bleed into the real world and the wolves she joined in her dream break into her bedroom as if to attack her. It's interesting to note that though the film is heavily based on Angela Carter's work, this ending was supposedly written

solely by Neil Jordan and did not receive Carter's endorsement (174). Does this ending negate the film's message of female liberation, or support it? Both readings are possible, though taken within the context of the film and Carter's body of work, it would seem that the ending does in fact support the overall theme. Carter's work is largely one that deals with opposites, "such as repulsion and desire, but never privileging one over the other" (175). This structure creates an oppositional relationship between dreaming Rosaleen and the Rosaleen of dreams, where the latter is the Other. The Rosaleen of dreams "fears girls like her sister, ones like her dreaming self—the passive, sleeping beauties" (175). Similar to the end of the film where Rosaleen fully embraces the Other within through her transformation into a wolf, the dreamer and dream aspects of Rosaleen must now be reconciled in order to form a cohesive, fully-realized woman. When the wolves force their way into her bedroom, the Rosaleen of the waking world is "possibly devoured and incorporated by her powerful, sexual, desiring Other, allowing a new understanding of femininity, sexuality, and power" (175). The wolves are not a punishment sent to Rosaleen as they are in many other versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," but rather an indication that she has successfully traversed her own path through the woods of adolescence rather than the path laid out for her by society.

The story of Little Red Riding Hood is vast and varied, spanning centuries, cultures, and forms of media. It is often frequently "a story of gendered violence, of sexual violation with a specific history in which certain elements have been emphasized to fit particular conceptualizations of gender and sexuality" (Marshall 266). This is evident in all early versions examined in this paper except Egbert of Liege's poem, which, though interesting, is an outlier in "Little Red Riding Hood" history. In these versions, Little Red Riding Hood is "compelled to assume responsibility for the 'predatory acts'

of...the assortment of wolves created in illustrations and narratives that are only too willing to eat her. In this way, the textual body of Little Red Riding Hood becomes a site of power/knowledge where discourses about sexual violation and femininity intersect” (266).

Considering these fairy tales from a poststructural point of view provides the ability to assess each tale based on its own cultural merits from its unique position in history rather than as part of a “universal category with one single meaning” (268). Rather than analyzing Little Red Riding Hood in terms of the concept of what it means to be a girl, poststructural critique instead looks at “the various and contradictory discourses that attempt to school children’s pregendered bodies into girlhood” (269). This point of view makes it possible to view, as this paper has, the character of Little Red Riding Hood as a dynamic character in history “whose representation intersects with larger cultural discourses about childhood, gender, and sexuality” rather than a static, single interpretation of how girls are meant to behave (268).

These discourses are not limited to historical representations of women but extend into modern, feminist treatments of the tale, as can be seen in Angela Carter’s iconic stories. Early forms of “Little Red Riding Hood” find the young girl guilty of the same thing so many young women are guilty of today when they encounter a wolf in the street, being “somewhere she should not have been, moving her body in ways that she should not have, carrying on in a manner so free and easy as to convey an utter abdication of her responsibility of self-protection, that is, of self-surveillance” (267-8). With this long legacy of requiring the victim to carry the burden of her punishment, how can a culture shift its perceptions about women? The answer, it seems, lies in changing the stories told to its children. The morals of the stories children hear when they are young are the morals they grow up perpetuating and in turn pass on to their children. If,

like Rosaleen, the children learn to tell new and different stories, then in time cultural perceptions of women can and will change.

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