

"Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?": The Story Behind the Story of Little Red Riding Hood

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Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, the stories that became our modern "fairy tales" were taking shape. Factors, such as culture, fears, and ideals influenced the way that these stories were told. As societies changed, so did the stories, and eventually these narratives evolved into the familiar modern versions. A single fairy tale can often tell a whole other story, one that can be used as a window to the past. To see these other stories, aspects of the narrative, such as characters, theme, symbolism and language must be examined. In this paper I argue that by taking a closer look at the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* it is possible to trace the evolution of one of our most familiar fairy tales, as well as uncover the wealth of historical and sociological information that lies beneath the surface of this seemingly simple child's yarn.

Like most fairy tales, *Little Red Riding Hood* began life as oral tradition. As with most folklore, it is difficult to pinpoint the story's exact origins. For as long as human society has existed, stories have been told, and scholars believe that the themes that permeate the fairy tales of today have been in existence for centuries. While we may not know how a particular story came to be, "according to Father W. Schmidt's theory: *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, we have information to the effect that certain themes of tales go as far back as 25,000 years before Christ, practically unaltered."¹ This could explain how versions of the *Little Red Riding Hood* story exist in several different parts of the world, including Europe, Africa, and Asia. It is often argued that the familiar fairy tales have roots in the myths and legends of primeval human culture, and "for a long time, anthropologists, folklorists, and historians maintained that the plot of *Little Red Riding Hood* had been derived from ancient myths about the sunrise and sunset."² This view likens the girl to the "light" who travels to the west, then is consumed by the "dark," or the evil wolf. While the inspiration and origin of the *Little Red Riding Hood* story is up for debate, there is some documentary evidence supporting its existence

at least as far back as the eleventh century. *The Richly Laden Ship*, or *Fecunda ratis* in Latin, is a poem written by Egbert of Liège between 1022 and 1024, and a section of this larger work bears a striking resemblance to the *Little Red Riding Hood* tale. The protagonist is a little girl in a red hood that was meant to be a meal for wolves. Jan M. Ziolkowski points out that "although Egbert drew extensively on the Bible and patristic writings, he also relied heavily, by his own admission, on the rich oral traditions that circulated in his region, a border zone between Germanic and Romance language and culture groups."³ The consensus among folklorists is that the basis of the *Little Red Riding Hood* that we are familiar with today "developed in an oral tradition during the late Middle Ages, largely in France, Tyrol, and northern Italy..."⁴ There, over time, folklorists have been able to gather evidence for several different versions of the tale.

While the fairy tales that we are familiar with are children's stories, the original versions of these fables, as well as the messages that they conveyed, were meant for adults and children alike. As sources of entertainment for a more mature audience, these stories contained violence, sexual situations, and other aspects that were not in the later versions. For example, there is an early version of the *Little Red Riding Hood* story from France that is known as *The Grandmother*. The wolf is actually a *bzou*, or werewolf. There is a scene where the *bzou*, disguised as the grandmother, tricks the girl into consuming parts of her actual grandmother in an act of unwitting cannibalism. Another disturbing portion of this story is a "striptease" that the *bzou* insists the girl perform before getting into bed with him. Also, after the being cornered by the *bzou*, the girl cleverly escapes by feigning the need to relieve herself. These scenes were omitted in later versions of the story. This is a demonstration of how the attitudes of society, as well as their sense of propriety, changed.

The oral versions of the narrative also

illustrate the common concerns of the societies through which they passed. These stories have the common theme of a warning tale. Realistically, it was unsafe for children to travel in the woods. They really could be attacked by animals, or even other people. Jack Zipes states in his book, *The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood: Versions of the Tale in a Sociocultural Context*, that "one of the most common European warning tales (*Schreckmärchen* or *Warnmärchen*) in the Middle Ages involved hostile forces threatening children who were without protection."⁵ The *Little Red Riding Hood* story's warning against evil has always been important, for there has always been "evil" present about which to warn people.

The witchcraft and werewolf craze that gripped Europe in the sixteenth century had an influence on the audience that listened to and passed on the early accounts of the story. The most obvious evidence for this is that the antagonist of the narrative is a werewolf. This is the explanation for why the girl does not recognize him in her Grandmother's bed. Rather than being the nightgown-clad canine depicted in more recent adaptations, this fellow was a shape shifter. Also, the sexual situations that he instigated would have been typical for a werewolf. During this time, it was believed that "werewolves manifested aberrant, fruitless sexuality,"⁶ and any sex act that did not result in procreation was considered unnatural. The *bzou* in the story wants to "eat" the girl, and "the sexual connotations suggested in the act of eating the girl would have implied an oral sex act that most likely would have been considered so unnatural and filthy as to only be fit for devilish enjoyment."⁷

The character of the Grandmother also demonstrates some traits associated with witchcraft. The fact that she was an elderly woman living alone on the outskirts of society must be noted. During the witchcraft craze, a woman in this position was in danger because "she might be scorned, tormented, or even burned as a witch, merely for being intelligent and having the knowledge of a long life at her disposal."⁸ Also, in their article "Little Red Riding Hood: Werewolf and Prostitute," scholars Richard Chase Jr. and David Teasley indicate that the wolf is familiar with where the grandmother lives in the tales, because he specifically asks the girl which path she is going to take to her house. This leads to the assumption that the wolf has a prior relationship with the grandmother, possibly even a sexual one. This sexual relationship is akin to an unnatural union

with a demon; a sure indicator of witchcraft. If the grandmother was a witch, then she would pass that trait on to the girl. Witchcraft was believed to have been passed down the generations through female lineage. The consumption of the grandmother's flesh would also be a vehicle for the transference of her so-called "witchiness." The girl would then "inherit damnation" from her grandmother.⁹

Another interesting symbol associated with witchcraft that is found in early versions, including *The Grandmother*, is the cat that admonishes the girl. When she is tricked into cannibalizing her grandmother, a small cat scolds "For shame! The slut is eating her grandmother's flesh and drinking her grandmother's blood."¹⁰ Some scholars believe that the cat is a symbol of witchcraft, representing a witch's familiar. This is significant considering the unnatural act for which the cat is scolding the girl. Chase and Teasley believe that the presence of the cat in addition to the girl's actions clearly denote witchcraft. They argue that "Red Riding Hood engages in anti-Christian acts including sexual immorality, cannibalism of a family member, and the mockery of the mass, all while she is in possession of a demon familiar."¹¹ One could take a different approach and view the cat as yet another sexual symbol contained in the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Robert Darnton, author of *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, makes the point that cats are often used as symbols of sexuality, and that "*le chat, la chatte*, [and] *le minet* mean the same thing in French slang as 'pussy' does in English, and they have served as vulgarities for centuries."¹² The cat is especially synonymous with female sexuality. Could it be significant that the cat is addressing the young female in the story? This is, perhaps, the girl confronting her own burgeoning sexuality and questioning the acts that seem so natural to her.

There was also other significant symbolism present in early depictions of the tale. Storytellers, unwittingly or not, included symbols into their stories about what was important to their culture at the time. Different symbols existed in different versions, and while some have persisted others have been taken out. Chase and Teasley point out that "folklorists have argued that a tale's symbolic features are retained and transmitted through the centuries because they remain meaningful to their users and because they refer to features of the real world as experienced by members of the storytelling communities. If this were not the case, tales would

have no function and would be forgotten."¹³

The cannibalistic consumption of the grandmother's flesh in the early versions of the *Little Red Riding Hood* stories is symbolic of more than just witchcraft. It also symbolizes the rising of the new generations to replace the old. Since the grandmother is past her childbearing years she is replaced by her granddaughter as a fertile sexual being. For instance, when the wolf eats the grandmother there is not sexual imagery, because "it is not stated that she is that she is physically attractive or that she is in bed naked with a wolf."¹⁴ In symbolic terms the grandmother in the tale is much more than a snack for a hungry wolf, she represents the generational conflicts that would have been a common domestic concern at the time. If a widowed mother-in-law was ousted from her domestic authority by her son's wife, she was in danger of becoming one of the aforementioned women who lived alone on the outskirts of society.

Another interesting symbol in *The Grandmother* version of *Little Red Riding Hood* is the Path of Pins. When the *bzou* asks the girl what path she was going to take to her grandmother's house, in some versions she replies the "Path of Pins." The pin has multiple symbolic meanings when related to this tale. Pins relate to the theme of witchcraft because they were used to check for the witch's mark. Chase and Teasley explain that "since the mark was a blemish on the skin that was insensitive, the discovery of the mark through the use of pin pricks became a standard feature of witch hunting."¹⁵ There is also a more widely accepted symbolic meaning of the Path of Pins. Pins were a symbol of a girls passing into maidenhood. In rural France common girls were sent to spend the winter with a seamstress when they started puberty. In her article, "The Path of Needles or Pins: Little Red Riding Hood," Terri Winding tells of this being a rite of passage for the girls, and the seamstresses who mentored them said that "they have been gathering pins."¹⁶ After the winter with the seamstress, and when they had turned fifteen, the girls officially entered their maidenhood, and were free to have male callers. Winding states that "it was by offering them dozens of pins that the boys formerly paid court to girls; it was by throwing pins into fountains that girls assured themselves a sweetheart."¹⁷ By choosing this path Little Red Riding Hood is in essence choosing the innocence of maidenhood and as a result her virtue.

The girl in *Little Red Riding Hood* does not choose to take the Path of Pins in every version of

the story. Like the Path of Pins, the Path of Needles represents another phase in the sexual development of young women. Needles are a symbol of sexual maturity, and the image of a needle being threaded illustrates this implicitly. Winding also makes the point that "in some parts of Europe, prostitutes once wore needles on their sleeves to advertise their profession."¹⁸ When the girl chooses to take this path she is symbolically choosing to become a sexually active and aware being. Then the question becomes whether or not she is really a victim of the seductive wolf's advances or a willing participant in the lascivious activities.



PETIT CHAPERON:
ROUGE.
CONTÉ.



L estoit une fois
une petite fille de
Village, la plus
jolie qu'on eut sçû voir.

Figure 1. Illustration from a version of Perrault's *Le Petite Chaperon Rouge*¹⁹

Eventually the oral traditions inspired writers to record versions of *Little Red Riding Hood*, and the authors of these narratives added their own touches. The first to publish a version of the story was Charles Perrault. In 1697 his version, *Le Petite Chaperon Rouge* was published as part of his work, the *Tales of Mother Goose*. Perrault was very much a part of the salon culture during Louis XIV's reign, and he wrote down these tales to amuse aristocratic audiences, reworking them to serve this purpose. Lydie Jean asserts, in her article "Charles Perrault's Paradox: How Aristocratic Fairy Tales Became Synonymous with Folklore Conservation," that "Perrault remade popular style by keeping the structure of the stories and some typical phrases, and he created a sense of belonging with intellectuals and aristocrats by using precious vocabulary."²⁰ Perrault omitted some of the "earthier" aspects of the story, such as the cannibalism, the striptease, and the girl's need to relieve herself. He did this to appeal to the more sophisticated tastes of the aristocratic

audiences, who felt themselves "above" this type of commonality. The ending of Perrault's story was also much darker, with the girl actually being eaten by the wolf.

Perrault's story was still a type of warning tale, but it was not a warning of the same type of danger that was demonstrated in the previous versions. He equated the trickery of the wolf in his story to the fast talking men who ply women with charm. It must be noted that Perrault's villain is an actual wolf, not a werewolf. This new wolf however had an evil of his own. He was cast in the role of a seducer. This was an especially important warning for the young ladies, whose value was placed on their virginities. The character of the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* has long been associated with male lust. Scholar Sharon P. Johnson states that "by choosing a wolf to represent masculine sexuality, the wolf's brutality conflates with a male's propensity for violence. Moreover, the wolf's animality implies that male behavior also may be guided by instincts instead of reason."²¹ The link between wolves and sexuality was well established at this time. Catherine Orenstein tells, in her book *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale*, that, "in the common slang of the day, even in the scholarly works of Charles Perrault, when a girl lost her virginity it was said that *ell avoit vû le loup* – 'she'd seen the wolf.'²²

These ideas are a reflection of French jurisprudence in the seventeenth century. According to Johnson "Perrault was a lawyer, an officer, and a member of the Académie Française during Louis XIV's reign."²³ He would have been familiar with the workings of the justice system of the time, and undoubtedly this would have influenced his world view. The situation that the girl in his *Le Petite Chaperon Rouge* found herself in closely resembled the crime of traditional rape, or even *rapt de séduction*. *Rapt de séduction* was an instance where the rape was perpetrated by a seducer. Women were considered partially responsible for the crimes of rape and *rapt*, and the female nature was believed to be weak and prone to sin. Johnson states in her article "The Toleration and Erotization of Rape: Interpreting Charles Perrault's *Le Petite Chaperon Rouge* within Seventeenth and Eighteenth-century French Jurisprudence," that it was "inferred that women desire to be raped; men give women what they want and thus are not guilty."²⁴ Male lust was often believed to be an instinct, much like the sinful nature of the female. A man's desire was considered

the motivation for these crimes, and coupled with the woman's so-called "desire to be raped," the severity of rape was downplayed. Men often were not punished for rape and "judges determined the perpetrator's guilt based on their interpretation of the female's behaviors."²⁵ A woman could be found responsible if she did not cry loud enough, if she was dressed inappropriately, if she was in the wrong place, or even if she was sufficiently beautiful to incite lust. The female was therefore deserving of this "crime of love." French jurisprudence of Perrault's time showed a distinct lack of justice for the female victims of rape and *rapt*. Perrault's *Le Petite Chaperon Rouge* mirrors this lack of justice for female victims when the girl is eaten by the wolf. The wolf, or male seducer, is not punished at all. It was the wolf's animal instinct (a type of lust, or hunger) that drove his actions, while the girl was guilty of enticing him with the attractiveness of her flesh.



Figure 2. Illustration by Gustave Doré for Perrault's *Le Petite Chaperon Rouge*.²⁶

The story of *Little Red Riding Hood* continued to evolve after Charles Perrault's adaptation. The Brothers Grimm published yet another version of this tale in 1812 in their *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* under the title of *Rotkappchen*. While they claimed to have gathered the tales directly from the German countryside, in reality the Grimms are believed to have been told the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* by one of their middle class friends of French Huguenot blood, Marie Hassenpflug. The Grimms were not concerned about being true to the original oral traditions or Perrault's *Le Petite Chaperon Rouge*. They regularly "sanitized" the folklore they collected to

fit Victorian standards of decency. They made the girl into an innocent, and added a woodsman to save her at the end of the story. In some versions of the Grimm's tales "the hunter-woodsman is not just father-like; he actually *is* her father."²⁷ This male savior was added to the story to rescue the hapless females from their own bad decisions, because attitudes of the time were that women *needed* male protectors. Even though Perrault and the Brothers Grimm deviated from the original oral traditions, they helped to keep the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* alive throughout the ages.



Figure 3. Illustration from an 1823 version of *Little Red Riding Hood*²⁸

Along with the evolution of the story, the character of *Little Red Riding Hood* herself has evolved to fit the ideals of the time. There are variations in her actions and the symbolism associated with her, and each version of the story, while keeping the same basic themes, differ in the treatment of this character. She is much more than the little girl that she seems to be at first glance. Robert Darnton commented on this character's transformation over time by stating, "she changed her character considerably as she passed from French peasantry to Perrault's nursery, into print, across the Rhine, back into an oral tradition but this time as part of the Huguenot diaspora, and back in to book form but now as a product of the Teutonic forest rather than the village hearths of the Old Regime in France."²⁹

The girl in the tale has been made virginal or promiscuous, depending on the version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, and beyond that, her actions, and even her attire can be analyzed for symbols. Her willingness to acquiesce to the wolf's very

ungrandmother-like behavior has been taken to symbolize her promiscuity, while her innocence to the point of being blind to her peril can symbolize her virginal state. The girl's age in the tales ranges from a child of five to a girl in the full bloom of puberty. There are symbols pertaining to the maturation of the girl throughout the tales. Her escape from the *bzou* in *The Grandmother* while tied to the umbilical-esque thread is symbolic of her rebirth from the "darkness." This birth symbolism is furthered by a version of the tale in which the girl escapes the wolf by crossing a river with the aid of laundresses. Francisco Vaz da Silva believes that "this is significant because, in traditional village life, washerwomen would aid in giving birth and preparing the dead bodies for burial."³⁰ The red attire worn by the girl is often said to symbolize menstruation, and the flowers that she gathers on the way to her grandmother's house are symbolic as well, because "a girl picking flowers is then, according to traditional conceptions, a metaphor of puberty – for the pubescent girl is 'in flower.'"³¹ There are also references to the girl's sexual maturity. When the girl removes her clothing before the wolf, and then burns them as instructed, the burnt clothing is symbolic of her virginity – they are unrecoverable once lost.³²



Figure 4. Post card by Carlos Aponte.³³

Below the surface of *Little Red Riding Hood*, there is a story behind the story. It was not always the children's tale with which we are familiar, warning children not to talk to strangers, or to always heed their parents. The original versions of the story were rife with violence and sexual

symbolism fit to entertain and appeal to adults. Red was not the dimpled, innocent little girl that is pictured in storybooks; rather, she was the performer of a striptease for her lupine admirer. The story had aspects of cannibalism, witchcraft, and uncontrollable male lust. *Little Red Riding Hood*

was bent to fit the norms of society over time, and continues to evolve today, with modern feminist versions depicting the girl saving herself by pulling a gun from her basket. As it has in the past, *Little Red Riding Hood* will continue to change and live on, happily ever after.

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Appendix

Selection from Egbert of Liège larger work *The Richly Laden Ship or Fecunda ratis* (translation from Latin):

"About a Girl Saved By Wolf Cubs"

- What I have to relate, country folks can tell along
with me,
2 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
4 and gave her a tunic woven from red wool;
sacred Pentecost was [the day] of her baptism.
6 The girl, now five years old goes out at sunrise,
footloose and heedless of peril.
- 8 A wolf attacked her, went to its woodland lair,
took her as booty to its cubs, and left her to
eaten.
10 They approached her at once and, since they
were unable to harm her, began, free from all
their ferocity, to caress her head.
12 "Do not damage this tunic, mice," the lisping
little girl said, "which my godfather gave me
when he took me from the font!"
14 God, their creator, sooths untame souls.³⁴

The Grandmother

There was a woman who had made some bread. She said to her daughter, "Go and carry a hot loaf and a bottle of milk to your grandmother."

So the little girl set forth. Where the two paths crossed she met the bzou [werewolf], who said to her, "Where are you going?"

"I am carrying a hot loaf and a bottle of milk to my grandmother."

"Which path are you taking?" said the bzou. "The one of needles or the one of pins?"

"The one of needles," said the little girl.

"Good! I am taking the one of pins."

The little girl entertained herself by gathering needles.

The bzou arrived at the grandmother's house and killed her. He put some of her flesh in the pantry, and a bottle of her blood on the shelf.

The little girl arrived and knocked at the door. "Push on the door," said the bzou. "It is blocked with a pail of water."

"Good day, grandmother. I have brought you a hot loaf and a bottle of milk."

"Put it in the pantry, my child. Take some of the meat that is there, and the bottle of wine that is on the shelf."

While she was eating, a little cat that was there said, "For shame! The slut is eating her grandmother's flesh and drinking her grandmother's blood."

"Get undressed, my child," said the bzou, and come to bed with me."

"Where should I put my apron?"

"Throw it on the fire. You won't need it anymore."

And for all her clothes – her bodice, her dress, her petticoat, and her shoes and stockings – she asked where she should put them, and the wolf replied,

"Throw them into the fire, my child. You won't need them anymore."

When she had gone to bed the little girl said, "Oh grandmother, how hairy you are!"

"The better to keep myself warm, my child."

"Oh, grandmother, what long nails you have!"

"The better to scratch myself with, my child!"

"Oh, grandmother, what big shoulders you have!"

"The better to carry firewood with, my child!"

"Oh, grandmother, what big ears you have!"

"The better to hear you with, my child!"

"Oh, grandmother, what a big nose you have!"

"The better to take my tobacco with, my child!"

"Oh, grandmother, what a big mouth you have!"

"The better to eat you with, my child!"

"Oh, grandmother, I have to do it outside!"
"Do it in the bed, my child!"

"Oh no, grandmother, I really have to do it outside."

"All right, but don't take too long."

The bzou tied a woolen thread to her foot and let her go. As soon as the little girl was outside she tied the end of the thread to a plum tree in the yard.

The bzou grew impatient and said, "Are you doing a load? Are you doing a load?"

Not hearing anyone reply, he jumped out of bed and hurried after the little girl, who had escaped. He followed her, but he arrived at her home just as she went inside.³⁵

Moral (in the form of a poem) from the end of Charles Perrault's *Le Petite Chaperon Rouge* (literal translation from the original French.)

As one can see by this, children,
 especially pretty young girls
 well bred and refined
 would do well not to listen to
 just anyone
 in which case it would be no
 strange thing
 if a wolf should eat them.
 I say wolf, because all wolves
 are not the same sort:
 some of them are quite charming,
 not loud or rough at all,
 cajoling sweet-talkers who
 follow young ladies
 right into their homes, right
 to their bedsides.
 But alas! Everyone knows these
 smooth wolves
 are the most dangerous of all!³⁶

Scene from the Brothers Grimm version of *Little Red Riding Hood* where the huntsman comes to the rescue:

Then he went into the room, and walked up to the bed, and saw the wolf lying there. "At last I find you, you old sinner!" said he; "I have been looking for you for a long time."

And he made up his mind that the wolf had swallowed the grandmother whole, and that she might yet be saved. So he did not fire, but took a pair of shears and began to slit up the wolf's body. When he made a few snips Little Red Riding Hood appeared, and after a few more snips she jumped out and cried, "Oh dear, how frightened I have been! It is so dark inside the wolf." And then out came the old grandmother, still living and breathing. But Little Red Riding Hood went and quickly fetched some large stones, with which she filled the wolf's body, so that when he waked up, and was going to rush away, the stones were so heavy that he sank down and fell dead.³⁷

Endnotes

³⁴ Jan M. Ziolkowski, *Fairy Tales from Before Fairy Tales: The Medieval Latin Past of Wonderful Lies* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 101.

³⁵ University of Pittsburgh. "Little Red Riding Hood and Other Tales of Aarne-Thompson-Uther Type 333 Translated and/or Edited by D.L. Ashliman 1999-2008," *Folktex: A Library of Folktales, Folklore, Fairy Tales, and Mythology*. <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0333.html> (accessed March 22, 2009).

³⁶ Catherine Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood Unclad: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 37-38.

³⁷ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Grimm's Complete Fairy Tales* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993), 142.