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Hidden female sexuality in Charles Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood” and Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves”

Upon a superficial or preliminary reading of Charles Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood” and other versions of the same folktale, the story seems simple: a little girl learning the dangers of trusting strangers and either suffering the fate that comes from that decision or escaping it by means of rescue from a male figure or her own intelligence. However, in this paper I argue that there is an important and perhaps central factor to the construction of this tale that deserves further analysis and scrutiny: the hidden representation of female sexuality. To anchor this argument, I will be looking at the story from a selected point of view through Charles Perrault’s classic “Little Red Riding Hood” and Angela Carter’s modern retelling, “The Company of Wolves.”

Before going deep into these two tales, it is important to remember that, contrary to the modern view of fairy tales, these stories were not written assuming an audience of children, at least not at first. In the fifth edition of *Folk and Fairy Tales*, Martin Hallet and Barbara Karasak write “even before Perrault published his now-famous collection, the popularity of the fairy tale was growing among the French upper classes, which often gathered in fashionable ‘salons’ to discuss matters of cultural and artistic interest” (Hallet and Karasak 16).

The assumption of this upper class audience greatly influenced and shaped the creation of Perrault’s tale. He situates the very people who would read them into the story, as seen from sentences like “this good woman made her a red hood like the ones that fine ladies wear when they go riding” (Perrault 32) and even the moral attached at the end, which I will go into further detail in a moment. And why does it matter that the presumed audience is of upper class adults? In “Little Red Riding Hood”, the title character (who remains nameless

and is only identified by her red garment) is tricked by the Wolf she meets on the path, dawdling on a road picking flowers while he races to the grandmother's house, eats her up and waits for the girl to arrive.

Upon her arrival, Little Red Riding Hood mistakes the Wolf for her grandmother, gets into bed with him and is promptly pounced at. Perrault ends the tale with the moral conclusion: "children, especially pretty, nicely brought-up young ladies, ought never to talk to strangers; if they are foolish enough to do so, they should not be surprised if some greedy wolf consumes them, elegant riding hoods and all" (Perrault 34).

I argue that this ending has nothing to do with the literal devouring of Little Red Riding Hood, but with a sexual assault that is suffered as a punishment and consequence from a lack of propriety from the part of the young lady. The wolf "first of all, (...) is not a real wolf – and arguably neither child nor adult reader ever takes him as such" (Hallet and Karasak 25), which here then symbolizes a young lady "allowing" herself to be ravaged by a man for giving him attention and not paying mind to her modesty and good behaviour. Francisco Vaz da Silva argues "although Perrault was no folklorist, he did address folktales in order to raise the morally worthy 'tales our forebears invented for their children' above the classic fables of the Ancients" (Silva 168).

The blame of the assault is placed on the victim, a victim here that can be seen not a little girl (the age of the protagonist is never disclosed) but as a young woman in the cusp of sexual awakening who allows her carelessness and maybe even her desire to lead her astray. Sun-Jin Lee argues "various prose and dramatic adaptations of Perrault's version emphasized 'obedience' as the central moral of the tale: 'if she were not gullible and disobedient, she could prevent the rapacious wolf from carrying out his designs'" (Lee 119), designs here being one of sexual nature. When she gets into bed with the wolf, the girl "took off her clothes and went to lie down" (Perrault 33) and is surprised by the Wolf's shape, not just his

hairiness, but what it symbolizes in terms of masculinity. “[...] Perrault insinuates that when the naked girl gets into bed, she meets the wolf’s male nakedness.” (Silva 176).

Her walk through the path of flowers can also be attributed to her journey into womanhood, an indication of her readiness for sex, a sign that she is ready to be, indeed, deflowered. “The proximate rationale for this metaphor is that the menarcheal blood foreshadows procreation, just as in plants the flowers precedes the fruit” (Silva 179). This symbolism of flowers and blood is also carried over to the signature color of the title character’s garment. Red, often associated with sexuality and a clear reference to blood helps place Little Red Riding Hood into a box of desire. “Charles Dickens foregrounded the florid color when he famously confessed to his youthful attraction to the girl” (Silva 180). The sexual lure can be associated with the menarcheal blood, the blood that signifies adulthood and sexual maturity.

The grandmother, who suffers the same fate in both Carter’s and Perrault’s tale (death) makes room for the young woman, capable and willing to reproduce. The grandmother is past her prime, her blood can mean only death and not the creation of new life and through the cannibalist act enacted by the Wolf, there is room for new life, even if it comes in violent terms. “Perrault presumably balked at describing an old woman being actually devoured by her own progeny, but the scene is crucial as a replacement was called for” argues Silva (184). “Metaphorically, older women ‘transmit’ their fertility to budding young women, who ‘absorb’ or ‘incorporate’ the procreative blood relinquished by their elders” (Silva 183).

Perhaps the most important aspect to compare Perrault’s tale with Carter’s story is the notion of agency versus passive action. While the protagonist in “Little Red Riding Hood” is portrayed as ignorant, gullible and ultimately suffers a sexual outcome outside of her choosing, the young woman in “The Company of Wolves” embraces her sexual awakening

and becomes the agent to her own story. The story paints her in a much more feminine and sexual light from the very start: “her breasts have just begun to swell; [...] her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white and she has just started her woman’s bleeding” (Carter 243). She is not the gullible, naive girl from the traditional tale, she “has her knife and she is afraid of nothing” (Carter 243).

As the protagonist in Carter’s story sets out into the woods, she does it of her own accord. She *chooses* to take the journey, even knowing the risks (as is exemplified by her carrying and gripping her knife.). When the Wolf does show himself on the path, he is “a fully clothed one, a very handsome young one” (Carter 244), one she instantly desires and promises a kiss to, should he win the wager they agree upon. In this story, she doesn’t dawdle on the path of flowers because she is innocent and distracted, but because she wishes him to win said wager and needs to stall in order to guarantee he does so. “What drives her is not the werewolf’s male authority, but her desire for him” (Lee 134). She is taking active steps toward her sexual desire, the desire to be kissed by the handsome man/werewolf that lept onto the path.

Her ultimate moment of agency comes at the end, however. Upon arriving at the grandmother’s cottage and finding the Wolf barring the door; and only the small clues that indicate she was devoured, the young woman decides right then that her fear will do her no good. Kimberly J. Lau claims “heterosexual male fantasies as expressed in pornography, strip clubs, and even mainstream media often revolve around Lolita’s appeal, whether she is pajamas, schoolgirl uniform, or cheerleader getup” (Lau 80). While this is true in many depictions of the character of Red Riding Hood, it is challenged and turned on its head in Carter’s tale: “the girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody’s meat” (Carter 248). The young woman sheds her red shawl, that symbol of oppressive sexuality, of forbidden desire and tosses into the fire willingly; her request of instructions from the Wolf deeply

erotic and full of agency as she removes each article of clothing. And when she is done, fully naked by the fire as her clothes burn: “then went directly to the man with red eyes in whose unkempt mane the lice moved; she stood up on tiptoe and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt” (Carter 247).

At the beginning of the story Carter describes the body of the girl as “an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane” (Carter 243). Sun-Jin Lee argues that this passage goes in tandem with the notion that “while men are agents who perform their sexual desires, women are the space in which men satisfy their desires. Within this power relation, female sexuality exists as absence or lack that male desire should fill. It is not women but men who control female desires.” And yet I argue that the transition from this description of the character, this image of her as a pure, demure young lady who is proper and obedient slowly dissolves like the snow that she mentions will be covered in blood. Her body is as is, but as she walks through the forest, meets the Wolf and makes the journey to her Grandmother’s house, she is already transformed. Her desire has been awakened and she responds to it by taking charge of it, by using her sexuality and expecting pleasure and danger from it.

The wildness of the ending, in which wolves are “howling in concert as if demented or deranged” (Carter 247) is arguably a representation of her own sexuality being let out, being released and howling at the moon. She sheds the shawl of propriety like she does the red one. Unlike Perrault’s girl, who suffers rape and is faulted by her own weakness, Carter’s protagonist “refuses to be a victim of sexual aggression and actively builds a sexual relationship with the werewolf based on the recognition of her own sexual/sensual desire” (Lee 132).

Kimberly J. Lau implies: “Carter is once again describing Little Red Riding Hood for the script of a traditional pornographic film, the desirable young nymphet caught in the male

gaze, and yet even as she zooms in on Little Red Riding Hood, she continues to grant her sexual agency, an agency that resonates with the Little Red Riding Hood tales that predate Perrault's essentially authoritative version." It's this duality that makes Carter's view of Red Riding Hood so interesting: the dichotomy of being a young innocent woman who is still allowed and capable of taking charge of her sexual desires despite expectations from her society puts her on a realm of three dimensional characters far removed from those of Perrault's creation; and empowering in its own right.

The Wolf as well suffers changes in the tales. Represented as an animal with base instincts and not a lot of discerning thoughts in Perrault's version, the creature is painted by Carter as a larger conflict of male sexuality. Lee writes on Carter: "this ferocious image of the wolf as the ruler of the dark forest signifies the intimidating realm of the primitive, libidinal, and unknown that borders on the realm of the civilized and common" (Lee 137). He is a beast, yes, a man with urges and desires and often impulses that are not controlled, but when Red Riding Hood assumes the nature and power of her own sexuality, he is somehow "tamed", forced to make room for the opposing nature of her sex to stand next to him, "between the paws of the tender wolf." (Carter 248). As Lee argues: "recognizing her sexuality and agency, the girl becomes an 'external mediator' who transforms the werewolf from an aggressive predator into a gentle lover" (Lee 140).

While Perrault eliminates aspects of his tale because they would not suit the high society audience he was possibly hoping to attract and who often read his stories, the element of sexuality is still as present in his tale as it is on Carter's, although perhaps with no so many words. "In fact, it was one of the few literary tales in history which, due to its universality, ambivalence, and clever sexual innuendoes, was reabsorbed by the oral folk tradition" (Hallet and Karasek 27). The fascination and fetishization of the female figure and sexuality are still driving forces behind the writing of "Little Red Riding Hood" and upon closer inspection it

becomes difficult to miss the double entendre of the actions taken by the characters in the story.

In fact, while it may be impossible to be certain if they were inspired by Perrault's story less than a century before, "in the 1760s, a highly publicized string of murders of mostly women in the Gévaudan region was credited to a fabled wolf. At the time printings of an elegy for a pubertal girl supposedly killed while wearing the red costume of her first communion, along with drawings of a pubescent naked girl mangled by the male beast, made the rounds" (Silva 172). The fascination of violence and sexuality is what I argue made this story survive and be interpreted through a sexual lens by so many contemporary authors and filmmakers. "Bear in mind that the French expression 'to have seen the wolf', applied to a girl means she has had amorous affairs" (Silva 174).

In conclusion, Perrault may have attempted to "sanitize" his telling of Little Red Riding Hood for the aristocracy and upper class of his time, but I argue the presence of a sexual history is not only undeniable but a driving force for the survival and sharing of the tale. The victimization of the main character and the symbolic nature of the color red and of flowers only reinforce an underlying patriarchal view of sex as something to be valued in the shape of virginity and judged outside of its propriety. The figure of a Lolita may have well begun with characters like Perrault's and it is very interesting to observe how they have become the basis for feminist retellings such as Carter's "The Company of Wolves."

The agency and sensuality of Carter's character and her willingness to not just embrace the sexuality that was hidden much more in Perrault's story; but to use it as a weapon and means of survival demonstrates the metamorphosis capability of these short stories; ones that can reveal so much about desire and societal expectations through nothing but the use of color and symbols hidden among the words. "For Carter, then, the virginal,

sexually precocious nymphet is not so much desired object of patriarchal protection but, rather, autonomous desiring subject, as bestial as the stranger-wolf” (Lau 88).

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