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Edited by

Laura Alexander

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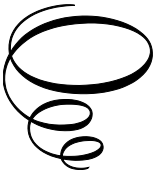

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INTRODUCTION

MIRROR, MIRROR: FAIRY-TALE ADAPTATIONS, MULTIFOCAL FORMS, AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

LAURA ALEXANDER

Fairy tales have a long history of literary intertwining with other genres, modes, narratives. Tales mix with other tales, in dialogue with cross-cultural narratives, readers, or listeners. They cross media in discursive contexts and narrative traditions. Each retelling tells us something about ourselves and the world we inhabit. Often the new tale challenges the earlier sources, what Cristina Bacchilega calls "activist adaptations," or retellings in different forms that critique the ideas, lessons, morals, or values of the original stories.[1] Such stories hold a mirror to the reader alongside the original fairy tale and its messaging.

Many early fairy tales, particularly those written or collected by figures like the Brothers Grimm in the nineteenth century, were used to reinforce conformity and obedience to authority. The original versions of Little Red Riding Hood were warnings about the dangers of straying from societal expectations, particularly for women. This is one of the first and most frequently adapted fairy tale, entangled as it is with the complex nature of sexual predation and vulnerability. Retellings of the tale refute, answer back, or even reject the earlier messages. The Brothers Grimm often emphasize obedience, piety, and the nuclear family structure, reflecting

[1] See her book, *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013) and her chapter, "Fairy-tale adaptations and economies of desire," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 80-81.

middle-class European values in their tales, though even early on, writers reveal the hypocrisy of structures through power symbols.

By the early twentieth century, fairy tales began to be explicitly repurposed to promote progressive political ideologies. Socialist movements, for instance, revise fairy tales to critique class divisions. Writers like Oscar Wilde in his *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) employed the fairy tale form to address issues like poverty and inequality. Walt Disney's adaptations of fairy tales in the middle twentieth century played a significant role in popularizing certain narratives but also reinforced traditional gender roles and heteronormative ideals. Disney's versions of *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) emphasize passive, submissive heroines and valorize marriage as a heteronormative ideal. Often demonizing older women and infantilizing younger ones, Disney has come under scrutiny by fairy tale writers. Angela Carter and Anne Sexton were among the first feminists to publish new tales that tackle the Disney versions' conservative values, particularly their depiction of women and the glorification of monarchical and capitalist structures.[2] This is particularly true when we consider the hype around these films.[3]

The 1970s and 1980s saw a resurgence of feminist retellings of fairy tales. Writers like Carter, in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), radically rewrote classic tales to emphasize female empowerment, agency, and sexual autonomy. These stories subverted the traditional patriarchal narratives, often giving heroines control over their own destinies. Postmodern authors also began to adapt fairy tales to challenge heteronormative and racist assumptions. Writers like Tanith Lee and Emma Donoghue rewrote fairy tales to include queer characters and relationships to subvert traditional fairy tale tropes by celebrating difference and nonconformity. Malinda Lo (*Ash*, 2009) has reimagined classic stories like *Cinderella* with LGBTQ+ themes, while Nalo Hopkinson (*Skin Folk*, 2001) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming*, 2005) have reimagined fairy tales from postcolonial, diasporic, or indigenous perspectives. These retellings challenge the Eurocentric narratives of the originals, offering more complex portrayals of identity, race, and culture. The recent #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements have offered contemporary fairy tale adaptations that have

[2] This holds true as well in the promotional ads, consumer goods, and other media hype around the marketing of films about fairy tales. See Gerard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane Lewin (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[3] Jack Zipes, "Media-hyping of Fairy Tales," *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 212-15.

addressed issues of consent, gender equality, and racial justice. Collections of feminist, anti-racist, and queer retellings continue to adapt the fairy tale form in multiple media. In the contributions that follow, the tales take up interpretative challenges to the textured histories of tales and find ways to consider how the new tale offers a rich new layer. As Maria Tatar reminds us, "Fairy tales, rather than sending messages, teaching morals, or constructing lessons, get conversations going."[4] These conversations reflect who we are and what we value and believe.

Anastasia Logotheti's chapter, "Red's Ever-After Transformations: (Re)Visions of Little Red Riding Hood," considers the fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood, or AT 333 in the Aarne-Thompson index of Types of the Folktale. The most classic story in the canon, Little Red Riding Hood continues to be reinvented, providing images and patterns now ubiquitous in the culture. As a tale that has evolved into very different versions, Little Red Riding Hood endows its main elements—human, animal, nature, color, darkness—with an indeterminacy which encourages subversive rewritings. The motifs of classic Little Red Riding Hood have made it a fable which puzzles adult audiences: are we to become complicit in maintaining gender stereotypes or should we confront expressions of male predatory sexuality and inequalities in constructions of female roles? This essay considers how in the later part of the twentieth-century four established female authors revisit, through parody, homage, and appropriation rather than adaptation, this archetypal encounter between girl and beast to create hypertexts which recuperate some of the traits of its original and produce a deliberate critique of normative social structures. Specifically, during and in the aftermath of the second wave of feminism four diverse but also complementary works, namely Ann Sexton's *Transformations* (1971), Olga Broumas's *Beginning with O* (1977), Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* (1999), reintroduce the fable to their contemporary audiences through poems or short stories that constitute feminist fairy tales. These transformations of Little Red Riding Hood explore gender issues that are both timeless and timely in a manner that questions established notions of femininity. By refusing to follow conventions, social and literary, and by exposing the inequalities that female stereotypes perpetuate, these re-visions of the classic tale expose how cultural constructs prescribe and reinforce the ideological status quo.

[4] "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

In Chapter Two, "Dystopian Features in Young Adult Fairy Tale Adaptation *Cinder* (2012) by Marissa Meyer," Diana Adamová and Veronika Nogolová explore the dystopian features in the young adult novel *Cinder* (2012), a fairy tale adaptation of Cinderella set in a futuristic world. The analysis focuses on the genre's characteristics and setting alongside the roles of its characters to establish how it conforms to and diverges from traditional dystopian narratives. In examining technological advancements, oppressive government, and the quest for identity, the authors show the ways in which Cinder employs classic dystopian elements to critique contemporary social issues such as inequality, environmental issues or the use of technology.

Natalia Orenstein's chapter, "Making a Meal Out of a Marriage in "Bluebeard's Egg" (1983)," considers Margaret Atwood's adaptation of the Bluebeard fairy tale. The association of women with writing about food parallels the correlation between social prescriptions about femininity and the domestic activity of food production. It is because of this connection that feminist revisions of classic western fairy tales have taken on an edible slant. In this chapter, Orenstein interrogates the intentionality of the feminist ideas communicated in Atwood's 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1983), looking through the prism of food.

Sara Dorsten's chapter, "The Blind Prophet and The Trans Prince: Adapting Myths and Fairy Tales in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando,*" adapts several myths. Woolf's *Orlando*, published by Woolf in 1928, was intended as a playful biography for her lover, Vita Sackville-West, at a time when queerness, and particularly transness, was coming under medical and psychological scrutiny. Many scholars since Orlando's publication have analyzed the character's gender performance in terms of feminism or queer theory, but interpreting Orlando as trans has been a recent development, despite the character's dramatic shift of sex partway through. This line of inquiry has largely been due to the novel's fantastic elements, as gender essentialism has caused some scholars to deny Orlando's transition, or trans scholars have viewed the fantastic as a way for Woolf to avoid discussing her character's embodiment. This chapter demonstrates that Woolf harnesses myth and fairy tale elements to circumvent contemporary medical realities of transness and the concurrent pathologization of queerness. To do so, Dorsten compares Orlando to the myth of Tiresias and another lesser-known fairy tale, "The Girl Who Pretended to Be a Boy," to illustrate Woolf's engagement with trans narratives. The fact that Woolf draws from not only queer but trans stories indicates the importance of transness to understanding Woolf's novel. Dorsen poses the novel within a lineage of trans history and literature.

Michaela Weiss's chapter returns to adaptations of Cinderella in "Rising from the Ashes: Rebecca Solnit's Revolutionary Cinderella Tale." Weiss examines Solnit's *Cinderella, Liberator* (2019), a modern adaptation of the classic fairy tale. Drawing from Charles Perrault's Cendrillon (1697), Solnit reimagines the story to emphasize personal growth, social awareness, and community over the pursuit of marriage. The narrative also integrates themes of immigration and social justice, paralleling the experiences of marginalized communities. By analyzing Solnit's adaptation alongside the Czechoslovak versions Princezna se zlatou hvězdou na čele [Princess with a Golden Star], (1959) and Tři oříšky pro Popelku [Three Hazelnuts for Cinderella], (1973), Weiss considers the elements of personal autonomy, respect for nature, and social responsibility. Ultimately, Solnit's work is presented as a revolutionary take on the fairy tale genre, highlighting the protagonist's journey towards self-empowerment and her role in fostering a supportive and inclusive community.

Madeline Gangnes's chapter, "Confining Spaces in Fairy Tales by Angela Carter and Emily Carroll," looks at the process of adaptation, rewriting, and "rewiring" (as Kelly Link describes Angela Carter's fairy-tale work) that allows writers and artists a space to critique the conservative values of fairy tales and folklore. Since the lives of women and girls have historically been dominated by confinement in one form or another, space is crucial to the genre. Whether such confinement may take place in a beast's castle, or a cramped cottage, or a dark forest, fairy-tale depictions of space are inextricably tied to caging—sometimes literally—women and girls. This chapter examines a selection of stories from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) alongside short comics from Emily Carroll's *Through the Woods* (2014) with reference to how each author/creator depicts natural and domestic spaces. Gangnes compares Carter's versions of the Little red Riding Hood tale in the final three stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, "The Werewolf," "The Company of Wolves," and "Wolf-Alice," with the introduction and conclusion of *Through the Woods* and echoes of Little Red Riding Hood in some of Carroll's other comics. Gangnes places Carter's and Carroll's interpretations of the "Bluebeard" tale—"The Bloody Chamber" and "A Lady's Hands Are Cold," respectively—into conversation with each other and some early variations of "Bluebeard" stories. Carter's feminist retellings of the original tales contrast with Carroll's versions, especially in their respective depictions of women and girls. Whereas Carter's tales empower her female protagonists, Carroll's girls and young women are victims—or potential victims—who can find no refuge in the spaces they inhabit and travel through.

Chapter Seven, "Oppressive Identity Construction and Resistance against It in Leigh Bardugo's "The Soldier Prince," by Valentina Markasović considers Leigh Bardugo's short story "The Soldier Prince" as a retelling of E. T. A. Hoffman's story "Nutcracker and Mouse King." Its plot revolves around the construction of identity of the main character; this process is conducted through a variety of speech acts. Drawing on theories by John L. Austin and Judith Butler, among others considering the intersection of identity and language, Markasović argues that the nutcracker's self is constructed and presented by outside forces. He ultimately manages to use the tool of his previous oppression to create his own identity as he wants it. The story understands the language to have power to create and recreate reality and to influence one's identity, but also shows the possibility of resisting oppressive forces.

Chapter Eight, "Social Transformation and Be[Longing] in Deaf Culture Fairy Tales: Signs of a Happily Ever After," by S. Leigh Ann Cowan, looks at adaptations by Roslyn "Roz" Rosen, a Deaf activist whose long career in deaf education and support sectors includes teaching, signed language education, captioning, telecommunications access, ASL advocacy, and women's rights. Using critical discourse analysis, this chapter explores Deaf Culture Fairy Tales, Rosen's retellings of traditional western fairy tales, as social critique of the exclusion and dismissal of deaf culture and people. Rosen often casts hearing-speaking people as villains, emphasizing that conflict stems from a phonocentric society's refusal to accommodate and accept deaf-signing people. Further, she subverts expectations of assimilation and insists upon social transformation rather than individual change. Cowan particularly focuses on four representative fairy tales: "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella," "The Little Mermaid," and "Beauty and the Beast." She contrasts these tales with their source materials and demonstrate how Rosen reframes and politicizes them in the context of American deaf culture and language.

In Chapter Nine, "The Mermaid as Abject: Ambiguity as Resistance in Hans Christian Anderson's 'The Little Sea Maid' (1837) and Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *Nine Silences* (2018)," Aoileann Ní Eigeartaigh considers how fairy tales and the neat binaries they employ play a crucial role in structuring and communicating hegemonic social values and roles. However, she argues, not everything can be contained on either side of a binary. Some beings can operate as a source of significant resistance to the neat sequence of binary oppositions, due to the ambiguous, liminal qualities they embody. This aligns with how Julia Kristeva (1982) theorizes the "abject," an ambiguous presence that threatens social stability through its refusal to be

neatly contained within borders. This chapter suggests that both the original Hans Christian Anderson story "The Little Sea Maid" (1837) and Doireann Ní Ghríofa's *Nine Silences* (2018) have at their heart an anxiety about the ambiguity and potential threat to social order represented by the mermaid, a being that cannot be definitively categorized as either human or nonhuman. This invests the mermaid with considerable power to dismantle hegemonic structures, particularly those pertaining to gender and sexuality.

In the final chapter by Jess Hannon, she considers the 'The Little Gift' and 'Beauty and the Board,' two fairy tale adaptations from Irish author Deirdre Sullivan's 2017 collection *Tangleweed and Brine*. These tales revise 'The Goose Girl' and 'Beauty and the Beast'and show how Sullivan deconstructs and subverts the fairy tale tradition. Both of the new tales offer scathing critiques of the stratification of society imposed by class divides. In the case of 'The Little Gift,' Sullivan resists the simplistic flattening of the characters present in the version of 'The Goose Girl' popularised by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm by focalising the text through the maid in a first-person narrative. Through this shift, Sullivan recontextualises the idea of nobility in the story. The princess is reframed as spoiled, ungrateful, and inconsiderate—as well as the instigator of the events that lead to the death of the maid. By positioning the princess not as a heroic figure but rather a traitorous one, Sullivan challenges traditionally accepted hierarchies of nobility and class. Similarly, Sullivan's adaptation of 'Beauty and the Beast' is a dark reimagining of the tale, wherein Sullivan's beast is a man who leaves a 'trail of broken brides' with impunity because he can pay the blood price. As with 'The Little Gift,' 'Beauty and the Board' demonstrates changing attitudes to social structures and expectations. Where 'Beauty and the Beast' is often considered a romantic love story for modern audiences—despite its implicit reinforcement of traditional gender roles—Sullivan refocuses our attention. We are encouraged to question what a happily ever after can mean in a stratified and violent society.

CHAPTER ONE

RED'S EVER-AFTER TRANSFORMATIONS: (RE)VISIONS OF LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

ANASTASIA LOGOTHETI

Young innocent meets evil predator in the forest: who will prevail? In the archetypal realm of fairy tales this binary evokes iterations of the most classic story in the canon, *Little Red Riding Hood*, the one Maria Tatar terms the "story of stories."[1] The tale has had a centuries-long grip on the popular imagination since it survives beyond children's literature and continues to be reinvented providing images and patterns now ubiquitous in the culture: the girl in red and the hungry wolf are polysemous signs floating beyond their origins in fable, their meaning shifting in diverse contexts while also maintaining disturbing elements that continue to intrigue in the twenty-first century.[2]

The European versions of the tale as presented to children, namely the authored versions of Charles Perrault and of the Grimm brothers, are cautionary tales, conservative, moralistic and didactic, seeking to encourage compliance with the prevailing aristocratic or bourgeois social rules of their respective times. Still, these versions of the tale have very different endings

[1] Maria Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, 2nd ed (New York: Norton, 2017), 12.

[2] For instance, see the article "Why Fairy Tales Matter" (2010) in which Maria Tatar offers examples of the use of *Little Red Riding Hood* to advertise cosmetics, cars or soft drinks. Similarly, in the chapter "Monsters in the Forest: *Little Red Riding Hood* Crimes and Ecologies of the Real and Fantastic" Bacchilega and Greenhill consider recent film and television allusions to the traditional fairy tale, referencing works in popular culture across continents from the last 30 years. Cristina Bacchilega and Pauline Greenhill, "Monsters in the Forest: *Little Red Riding Hood* Crimes and Ecologies of the Real and Fantastic," in *Monstrous Beings and Media Cultures: Folk Monsters, Im/Materiality, Regionality*, eds J. Balanzategui and A. Craven (Amsterdam UP, 2023).

in relation to the fate of the naive child protagonist.[3] While Perrault allows the child in *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* (1697) to be devoured by the wolf, the Grimm brothers introduce a hunter who saves the grandmother and the little girl in *Rotkäppchen* (1812): the terminal punishment of the late-seventeenth-century protagonist in Perrault is no longer condoned in the Grimms' Romantic age which venerates the innocence of the child and seeks to educate more than chastise.

Saved or not, the female protagonist of Perrault and of the Grimms courts disaster through naivete which leads to disobedience, according to the most common views of this story. As Bacchilega aptly notes, the "gender ideology" and "sexual politics" of these two versions are "remarkably similar."[4] The motifs of classic *Little Red Riding Hood* have made it a fable which puzzles adult audiences: are we to become complicit in maintaining gender stereotypes or should we confront expressions of male predatory sexuality and inequalities in constructions of female roles? Psychoanalytic readings, from Freud and Jung to Fromm and Bettelheim, have offered a variety of interpretations but agree that it is a "tale of seduction,"[5] which alludes to adolescent sexual desire and the dangers that await a young woman who ventures into the woods. Yet, the original protagonist of a story emerging from oral folk tradition[6] is hardly a young innocent who needs to be cautioned, disciplined or saved. The peasant girl featured in unwritten earlier versions of the tale is a self-reliant heroine, "brave and shrewd,"[7] who saves herself: a "trickster figure" as Maria Tatar suggests.[8]

Classified in the Aarne-Thompson index of *Types of the Folktale* as AT 333,[9] a type of tale that focuses on a gluttonous beast, *Little Red Riding*

[3] For a discussion of the variations in the versions of the tale and its different endings, see Chapter 3 in Christina Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1997), 49-70.
[4] Christina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 58.
[5] Michelle Scalise Sugiyama, "Predation, Narration, and Adaptation: *Little Red Riding Hood* Revisited. *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 5.2 (Spring 2004): 110.
[6] For a detailed discussion of "*Little Red Riding Hood* in Oral Tradition" see Verdier's essay in *Marvels & Tales* (11.1/2 (1997), 101-123).
[7] Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 1993), 26.
[8] Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, 7.
[9] The tale is considered to be the first known variant of tale type 333 with more than two hundred versions recorded (Vaz da Silva, "Perrault and the Evolution of *Little Red Riding Hood*," 168). For more details on the oral variations of the tale and Perrault's version, see Vaz da Silva. On the difficulty of classifying tales, see Ashliman.

Hood concerns hunger in its most elemental form: the wolf's attention to his physical needs parallels the grandmother's need for sustenance as well as the girl's desire to stray from the path and enjoy an adventure in the woods. The human/beast dialectic in the context of hunger and desire conforms with and challenges established binaries of good vs evil: predator and prey may have more in common than the initial contrast suggests.[10]

Which is the nexus of power relations within which the protagonist exists in the cultural unconscious, beyond and apart from the encounter with the wolf? How do women signify within and outside of the male gaze in a patriarchal society? As a "formation tale, a *Bildungmärchen*,"[11] with three female characters, a mother, a grandmother and a daughter, each representing a generation,[12] the tale explores familial roles in its different iterations across time. As Jack Zipes explains in *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, not only the versions of the classic tale but also adaptations engage with cultural attitudes on gender, sexuality and power struggles. Feminist scholarship on fairy tales, Donald Haase explains, has done "justice to the complexity and diversity" of the genre.[13]

In "Fairy-tale Adaptations and Economies of Desire" Cristina Bacchilega argues that the "hypertextuality" of versions of a fairy tale suggests that each retelling "participates in a web of variously linked texts" so that each "fairy-tale hypertext" is "both an adaptation of a specific narrative text and its unpredictably interactive participation in much larger narrative and discursive networks where there is no single source or trajectory."[14] While Bacchilega's aforementioned chapter explores twenty-first century adaptations of *Snow White*, her interest in the "activist stance" of recent retellings

[10] Marina Warner finds significance in the protagonist's confusion over "wolf and granny" since they "both dwell in the woods" and "need food urgently." Marina Warner, "Granny Bonnets, Wolves' Cover" in *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994): 181.

[11] Emanuele Antonelli, "*Little Red Riding Hood*: Victimage in Folktales and Cinema—A Case Study," (*Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, 22, 2015): 109. See Antonelli for a brief discussion of the variety of psychoanalytic readings; for an extended and thorough analysis, see Alan Dundes, "Interpreting *Little Red Riding Hood* Psychoanalytically," in *Little Red Riding Hood: A Casebook*, 192-238.

[12] For a discussion of various critical views of "intergenerational female relationships" in this tale, see Wide's essay "Grandmas Do Worse" in *NORA* (31.3 (2023): 249-263).

[13] Donald Haase, "Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship," in *Folk and Fairy Tales*, 5 ed, edited by M. Hallett and B. Karasek (Broadview P, 2018): 395.

[14] Cristina Bacchilega, "Fairy-tale Adaptations and Economies of Desire," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales* (Cambridge UP, 2014): 80.

regarding the investigation of the "gendered dynamics of acculturation and economies of desire"[15] also informs this essay's reading of transformations of *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Noted for its "unique position as the most popular memetic tale that enunciates the gender conflict,"[16] *Little Red Riding Hood* is a tale that has evolved into very different versions thus endowing its main elements—human, animal, nature, color, darkness—with an indeterminacy which encourages subversive rewritings. This essay considers how in the later part of the twentieth century four established female authors revisit, through parody, homage, and appropriation rather than adaptation, this archetypal encounter between girl and beast to create hypertexts which recuperate some of the traits of its original and produce a deliberate critique of normative social structures. Specifically, during and in the aftermath of the second wave of feminism four diverse but also complementary works, namely Ann Sexton's *Transformations* (1971), Olga Broumas's *Beginning with O* (1977), Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* (1999), reintroduce the fable to their contemporary audiences through poems or short stories that constitute feminist fairy tales. In the aforementioned collections new versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* explore gender issues that are both timeless and timely in a manner that questions established notions of femininity. By refusing to follow conventions, social and literary, and by exposing the inequalities that female stereotypes perpetuate, these re-visions of the classic tale subvert norms that limit human potential.

Anne Sexton, *Transformations* (1971)

In *Transformations* the American poet Anne Sexton (1928-1974) rewrites seventeen Grimms' tales in a manner that combines a retelling of the main plot elements of each story with a questioning of the elemental patterns that keep the tale relevant to contemporary audiences. As Ostriker points out, each poem reinterprets "prior, external, shared cultural traditions."[17] Each poetic retelling in *Transformations* begins with an introductory part which functions as a prologue and presents the main theme through mini-narratives that relate each fairy tale to contemporary settings. In the first poem of the collection, "The Gold Key," Sexton introduces herself as "a middle-aged

[15] Bacchilega, "Fairy-tale Adaptations," 80.
[16] Zipes, *Irresistible Fairy Tale*, 147.
[17] Alicia Ostriker, "That Story: Anne Sexton and Her Transformations" (*American Poetry Review*, 11.4, 1982): 11.

witch" and terms her endeavour "this book of odd tales / which transform the Brothers Grimm."[18] Without abandoning the confessional style that established her poetic reputation in the 1960s, Sexton subsumes the personal in the persona of the storyteller, in this case one with magical properties albeit a witch not a fairy, intimating the troubling nature of these revisions.

In the 1000-word retelling of "Red Riding Hood" the introductory verse-paragraphs focus on "deceivers"—a "suburban matron," "two seemingly respectable women," a "standup comic"—before the speaker confesses "and I. I too." In Sexton's retelling deception is linked to performance so the wolf is a "deceptive fellow" but hardly different from the speaker who appears "quite collected" at social gatherings although "undergoing" internally "open-heart surgery." The speaker's implicit identification with "a wolf dressed in frills" alludes to the performative aspect of gender, allowing us to empathize with otherness: the wolf, like any woman performing femininity, is "a kind of transvestite." In Sexton's version the wolf is not only a villain but also a victim of deception, the one who illustrates how stereotypes force women into roles which render them passive and helpless. In the poem the huntsman, the little girl and the grandmother play the traditional parts they have been assigned and survive by obeying normative patterns. Only the self-deceiving wolf, who assumes the woman's part, is "killed by his own weight." The "large stones" that "filled his belly" suggest that death is the only outcome of the pregnancy of deception.

In Sexton's version the killing of the wolf and the survival of the girl and of the grandmother do not suggest a happy ending: the huntsman is the only one with power and he destroys any element of independence and wildness. While the poem's title omits "little" there is no doubt that the protagonist remains powerless and with no inclination to revolt against the prescribed social roles that create deceivers and keep generations of women commodified. Leventen pertinently notes that in *Transformations* Sexton "confines herself to dissecting the trivialization and alienation that result from male control of female autonomy."[19] At the end of the poem the women, "remembering / nothing," are doomed to perpetuate a status quo that requires their compliance and obedience. Yet, Sexton's speaker, the "witch," as well as the poem's audience, can choose to remember and to

[18] Anne Sexton, *Transformations*, 1-2. All textual references poems in this collection relate to the 1971 Houghton Mifflin edition.
[19] Carol Leventen, "*Transformations*'s Silencings," in *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*, ed. Linda Wagner-Martin (Boston: Hall, 1989): 140.

remain vigilant even if living with the awareness of deception resembles a wolf in grandmother's clothing and feels like "undergoing" internally "open-heart surgery." This reworking of "Red Riding Hood" refocuses attention on the social structures that define the feminine as powerless thus turning even a wild beast into a helpless granny. Performing gender roles while questioning the acceptance of these norms may be why the transvestite beast emerges as an unexpectedly radical element in Sexton's retelling.

Olga Broumas, *Beginning with O* (1977)

Without a trace of Sexton's self-deprecating humor, the speaker in Olga Broumas's "Little Red Riding Hood" uses the tale's basic patterns to speak of her own experience as a woman who eschews the world of men.[20] The speaker is a daughter addressing her mother with sincerity, respect and devotion. No longer a child, she thinks back to the moment of her own birth when her bloody entrance into the world was the first time she was "dressed" in her "red hood."[21] Turning the attention back onto the female characters, Broumas offers new meaning to the tale's fundamental imagery: alluding to blood, "red" becomes the symbol of femininity; the "basket of gifts" suggests the womb; appropriating a wolfish sound, "howling" is transformed into a woman's triumphant cry. Women have been the storytellers across centuries, the ones that give life and common-sense advice: "mind / where you go, mind / you get there." Care is only provided in a world of women, of mothers and midwives in solidarity against male dominance. Womanhood offers strength and protection in a patriarchal world in which "the white clad doctor" represents the wolf, his medical instruments, "forceps" and "scalpel," like a beast's claws, seem ready to subjugate any new-born.

Although the speaker recognizes the care in her mother's advice, she also feels oppressed by the need to follow the trodden path. As a member of a younger generation informed by feminism and sexual liberation, she knows that she has to keep "the hood secret" while seeking the company of "other women / who might be walking the same road to their own / grandma's house." Yet, without a daughter of her own, the speaker recognizes that she herself will never be either the mother that gives birth and advises or the

[20] Orenstein considers that the wolf is absent from this poem which she characterizes rather reductively a "lesbian retelling." Catherine Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked* (New York: Basic Books, 2002): 162.
[21] Olga Broumas, "Little Red Riding Hood," in *Beginning With O*. All textual references to this poem relate to the 1977 Yale UP edition.

grandmother who waits. The speaker is even sadder that her own mother will keep expecting, but will never receive, her own "laden basket of love." The speaker's mournful acknowledgement of a certain degree of powerlessness is made more intense at the end of the poem which concludes in the woods: "this improbable forest / peopled with wolves and our lost, flower-gathering / sisters they feed on." Toxic masculinity is the only version of maleness in the poem; no fatherly huntsman appears to save the less cautious sisters.

Appearing in Broumas's first poetry collection *Beginning with O*,[22] this retelling is dark and pessimistic, identifying all men as wolves, but also advocates in favour of a female community that offers tenderness, love and protection against threatening and abusive patriarchal norms. Like other poems in Broumas's collection, the relationships of women to each other are foregrounded and explored against cultural paradigms which assign stereotypical identities to female characters: instead of the patterns of behaviour in the Grimms version—the naïve girl, the weak grandmother, the disobeyed mother—Broumas's poem presents a thoughtful daughter and a caring mother. The bond among women in this retelling is both familial and sexual, balancing the grief in the daughter's voice against the mournful acknowledgement of an unjust world which expects women to obey alienating models of behavior. While the speaker's sexuality appears to have stopped her from becoming a mother, her secret weapon is "her small hood" and she relishes the comfort and companionship of women. This "Little Red Riding Hood" belongs to an adult world beyond fairy tales but reclaims both "red" and "hood," turning them into positive signs while celebrating the female body and women's solidarity.

Carol Ann Duffy, *The World's Wife* (1999)

Another openly lesbian poet, Carol Ann Duffy (b. 1955 in Glasgow, Scotland) was, unlike Broumas, already an acclaimed poet when she published the best-selling collection *The World's Wife* in 1999. However, the honors that followed for Duffy were even more prestigious, including the T S Eliot prize

[22] The collection won the Yale Younger Poets Award. Greek-born Olga Broumas (b. 1949) immigrated to the US in 1967 to study and then made America her adopted home, winning various awards for her poetry. As Edwards suggests, her poetry is characterized by "sensual lyricism" and interrogates "language as a political tool" while celebrating the "visceral authority of the body." Leigh H. Edwards, "Broumas, Olga," in *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, ed by C. N. Davidson, L. Wagner-Martin, et al. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995).

(2005) and the PEN/Pinter prize (2012) as well as her being selected to serve as the UK's first female Poet Laureate (2009-2019).[23] Combining critical praise with accessibility and popularity, Duffy employs wit in discussing gender roles and sexual politics, thematic staples in her work. The aforementioned collection, which starts with the poem "Little Red-Cap," gives voice to thirty silenced female characters, some of them historical or legendary, others mythical or fictional, none of them famous except as mothers, wives or daughters of eminent men. Through monologues[24] of varying lengths, the poems explore socially imposed identities in a manner that "systematically undermines the myths by which masculinity has been sustained."[25] When women such as "Mrs Aesop," "Queen Herod," or "Mrs Tiresias" speak their side of the story against the known record of their husbands, the ironies of patriarchal dominance are exposed; similarly, the wives of famous scientists, like "Mrs Darwin" and "Frau Freud," tell stories which reduce these men into ordinary husbands. The originality of Duffy's concept increases with each monologue. Whether referring to historical or fictional partners, the female characters are presented as late-twentieth-century figures in terms of their feminist ideology and their insistence on girl power. Although each female speaker demonstrates traits unique to their experience, they are not presented as heroic or admirable. They seem extraordinary because they are resilient and resourceful as women have to be; above all, they are full of desire to be heard and acknowledged, asserting their right as human beings to claim a part of myth or history.

Duffy's version of *Little Red Riding Hood* is far more empowering than those of Sexton and Broumas since it celebrates Red-Cap's victory over the slain wolf as well as her coming "out of the forest" with the "flowers" she has picked.[26] While the poem keeps essential traits of the classic fairy tale, they serve a self-conscious account of the development of the speaker's poetic voice, after engaging at length with the wolf. The protagonist is sixteen, "at childhood's end," and eager to learn about "poetry." She understands that the wolf she meets, an older poet who represents poetic

[23] Jane Dawson, *Carol Ann Duffy: Poet for Our Times* (London: Palgrave, 2016).
[24] For a detailed discussion of the use of "lyric and dramatic modes of poetic expression" in Duffy's collection see Shelley Roche-Jacques, "'Out of the Forest I Come:' Lyric and Dramatic Tension in *The World's Wife*" (*Language and Literature*, 25.4, 2016), 363–375.
[25] This quote comes from a review of *The World's Wife* which aptly terms the collection "radical" and praises Duffy for a "major achievement." Laurie Smith, "With One Bound She Was Free" (*Magma*, 16, Winter 2000).
[26] Carol Ann Duffy, "Little Red-Cap," in *The World's Wife*. All textual references to this poem relate to the 1999 Macmillan edition.

tradition, can play an essential part towards the discovery of her own voice. Instead of being a victim, Red-Cap encourages the wolf to stereotype her as "sweet sixteen … babe, waif" so she can benefit from his knowledge without his recognizing her ambition. She knowingly adopts the role of the "little girl" while the wolf is hardly threatened, thinking only of his appetite, like the glutenous beast of oral tradition. Determined, Red-Cap "crawl[s] in his wake" and, willingly reaching the "wolf's lair," allows him to seduce her. Thus, the wolf teaches her first the "love poem." The loss of her innocence is violent but so is her desire for knowledge: she "clung till dawn to his thrashing fur, for / what little girl doesn't dearly love a wolf?"

While the wolf sleeps unaware, having devoured in "one bite" the "white dove" she brings him, the speaker eats "words, words" during a long apprenticeship at "the back / of the lair where a whole wall" is "aglow with books." As an established poet, the wolf takes her offerings, both herself and the bird, for granted; he no longer relishes the inspiration her "white dove" delivers but for Red-Cap, the aspiring poet, "words [are] truly alive on the tongue." For "ten years" she learns the craft and slowly demystifies the "greying wolf" who "howls" what she now recognizes as "the same old song at the moon." Empowered, the speaker explores the language of poetic tradition not with reverence but with violence: she takes "an axe" to a weeping willow and "an axe" to a leaping salmon before taking "an axe" to the wolf. She discovers, without surprise, her "grandmother's bones" in the wolf's "cold belly." Then she fills it with "stones," leaving behind established poetic diction and the patriarchal voice of tradition. In the end Red-Cap emerges "out of the forest" triumphant, "singing," a new and original poetic voice.

While Sexton uses the tale to comment on deception in an alienating social environment which reduces everything to performance, and Broumas in her version offers solace only through sisterhood and a secret world of women, Duffy boldly faces the inevitability of engaging with tradition to learn how to demolish established norms. As Hudson argues, Duffy's "Little Red-Cap" is "almost a literary manifesto"[27] which details the need to understand male standards in literature as well as in society to outwit patriarchy and escape oppression. Against a world divided by gender stereotypes, Duffy's Red-Cap uses her knowing innocence to lure the wolf into submission. Like the girl in the folk versions of the tale, Duffy's protagonist is smart and her instincts guide her to survive and to thrive. As Dawson notes, "in postmodern flirtation with the grand narratives of history, Duffy takes

[27] Libby Hudson, "An Axe to a Willow" (*English Review*, 18.2, 2007).

stories from different periods to undercut the binary formulations of sex and gender that they perpetuate."[28] At the end of the poem the speaker is "all alone," a statement suggesting a readiness not only to create in a new poetic vein but also to challenge the establishment, which remains biased and patriarchal, with courage and panache.

Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979)

Duffy's "rejection of the heterosexual male"[29] is apparent but her female characters are not victims; neither are they villains or saints. Duffy's women are complex and diverse as is her engagement with patriarchal standards, influenced by the paradigm set earlier by British novelist Angela Carter (1940-1992), whose work not only critiques patriarchy but also invites us to see beyond, as Gable suggests, the "oppressor/oppressed dualism."[30] Published in 1979,[31] the ten-story collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* re-envisions and builds on classic tales, specifically *Bluebeard*, *Snow White*, *Beauty and the Beast*, as well as *Little Red Riding Hood*. Prompted by her study of the Perrault tales when she was commissioned to translate them for publication in 1976,[32] Carter unites in the stories of *The Bloody Chamber* different traditions of fantasy fiction—fairy tale, romance, and gothic—to create postmodern tales in which women, as Makinen suggests, "grab their sexuality and fight back."[33] In her 1983 essay "Notes from the Front Line" Carter explicitly states her interest in exposing "the social fictions that regulate our lives" and declares she is "in the demythologizing

[28] Jane Dawson, "Feminist Talking Heads," in *Carol Ann Duffy: Poet for Our Times* (London: Palgrave, 2016). Interestingly, this section, which discusses *The World's Wife*, never mentions "Little Red Cap."

[29] Antony Rowland, "Love and Masculinity in the Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy" (*English*, 50, 2001), 214.

[30] Sarah Gamble, "Penetrating to the Heart of *The Bloody Chamber*," in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2008), 28.

[31] Lorna Sage characterizes 1979 "Carter's *annus mirabilis* as a writer" since the publication of *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Sadeian Woman* in the same year brought her a new audience and wider popularity. In the same essay Sage also notes that 1979 is the year of the publication of Gilbert and Gubar's "hugely influential" *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Lorna Sage, "Angela Carter: The Fairy Tale," *Marvels & Tales*, 12.1 (1998): 52-69.

[32] For a discussion of Carter's translation of Perrault, see Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, "Updating the Politics of Experience: Angela Carter's Translation of Charles Perrault's "*Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*" (*Palimpsestes*, 22, 2009), 187-204.

[33] Merja Makinen, "Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality" (*Feminist Review*, 42, Autumn 1992), 3.

business."[34] "Demythologizing" is the method she follows in her fairy-tale revisions which challenge with feminist vigor gender conventions, social and literary, and expose them as fictions and myths, training her audience to deconstruct standard views of female sexuality.

Of the ten stories in *The Bloody Chamber* the final three, namely "The Werewolf," "The Company of Wolves," and "Wolf-Alice," constitute playful intertextual re-imaginings of *Little Red Riding Hood*. These tales of "women-in-the-company-of-wolves,"[35] as their titles suggest, "undermine the authority of the traditional tale," Lau believes, while offering the protagonists agency.[36] The stories are set in a "northern country,"[37] an old world of superstitions, populated by werewolves and witches, feral beings and vampires. The werewolf in the first story is revealed to be the grandmother, who is both wolf and witch; on her way to her grandmother the unnamed girl survives being attacked, chases the werewolf / witch away and takes possession of the grandmother's house. By reversing the traditional wolf-dresses-as-granny cliché into the novelty of grandmother-is-the-wolf, this version de-genders the danger that threatens the girl and foregrounds the need for the protagonist to become self-sufficient and save herself using her "father's hunting knife."

Carrying not only the "oatcakes" her mother baked but also a weapon, the "good child" is dressed in a "scabby coat of sheepskin." Without the red cape but wearing white, is the girl a lamb, as the sheepskin suggests, or a wolf in sheep's clothing? The girl is both: she knows the forest and stays "on her guard" so when the wolf attacks, she fights back and slices off the animal's paw which, by the time she reaches her sick grandmother's house, turns into a human hand. No words are exchanged either with the wolf or with the shrieking grandmother who acts like "a thing possessed." A shapeshifting grandmother: is she a 'werewolf"? or a "witch," as the neighbors claim who chase her out and stone her to death? The "strong"

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[34] The essay is reprinted in Carter's non-fiction collection *Shaking a Leg*. The essay, in which Carter also declares that she regards herself "as a feminist writer because I am a feminist in everything else," is frequently referenced by Carter scholars (for example, see Oramus) when discussing Carter's conscious engagement with aspects of gender and sexuality.

[35] This is Bacchilega's term for the trio of stories (Christina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 59).

[36] Kimberly J. Lau, "Erotic Infidelities: Angela Carter's Wolf Trilogy" (*Marvels & Tales*, 22.1, 2008), 78.

[37] Angela Carter, "The Werewolf," pages 108-110. All textual references to this short story relate to the 1995 Vintage edition.

child can fight against anything, natural or supernatural; aided by her father's knife and assisted by the community, she not only survived but "prospered." In this tale the demonic witch shapeshifting into werewolf and the knife-yielding girl are powerful figures who take on traditionally male roles—werewolf and hunter respectively—in a context that foregrounds intergenerational strife, challenging the old with the new. The phallic knife that castrates the grandmother's hand used to be the father's but now belongs to a female warrior who takes over the "house," having defeated old power and superstition.

Werewolves, transformations and a female warrior feature again in the second story, "The Company of Wolves," which is the longest of the three, set again in a "savage country" full of superstitions and tales of werewolves.[38] Borrowing elements from oral tradition as well as from the Perrault and the Grimms versions, this retelling of *Little Red Riding Hood* ends again with the protagonist's triumph over the wolf as well as over the stale clichés of tradition. While Carter uses many specifics from the classic versions, the new elements introduced become all the more startling. This unnamed protagonist is a "flaxen-haired girl" who is "indulged" by her mother and her grandmother who knitted her the "red shawl" she wears; but she is also a "strong-minded child" who has just entered puberty. Both innocent and bold, she carries a "carving knife" and "she is afraid of nothing," like a virgin warrior.

The handsome hunter she meets in the woods is not the one who will save her but the wolf in disguise; yet, this girl is confident enough to flirt with him. She does not become intimidated even later when she realizes her granny is gone and she is "in danger of death." The story's setting, Christmas eve, is one of the longest nights of the year; outside the grandmother's house a chorus of wolves "howling in concert as if demented." The girl empathizes with the wolves who are hungry and cold, she calls them "poor things" and "ceas[es] to be afraid." The anticipated dialogue with the wolf, which includes the well-known references to his "big eyes" and "big teeth," is part of an act of seduction she controls. Although the wolf has already devoured the grandmother, he is tamed by this girl who "knew she was nobody's meat."

Having more in common with the trickster figure of oral tradition, Carter's protagonist in this story mates with the wolf-man in a "savage marriage

[38] Angela Carter, "The Company of Wolves," pages 110-118. All textual references to this short story relate to the 1995 Vintage edition.

ceremony" which unites two beings that desire one another's "flesh." Her almost eager undressing points at her liberation from the identity attached to her "Little Red Riding Hood" costume. The clothing they "throw in the fire" suggests being freed from convention. Naked, she kisses the wolf, a "wise child" who recognizes, and acts upon, her own desires. While the wolf seems to believe he is in control, her nakedness connotes an animal self that gives her agency, a weapon more potent than the knife she does not seize. Beneath the ferocity of the "carnivore incarnate," she finds the "tender wolf" in her partner and in herself and, as Bacchilega suggests, "fearlessly lives out her sexuality."[39] Animal and human, female and male, self and other: such binaries are rejected in this second story which foregrounds animal drive as agency. This version ends with the girl sleeping peacefully "in granny's bed," in possession of the house and, as the title suggests, content to be in "the company of wolves."

The radical treatment of gender and sexuality in this rewriting highlight Carter's intention to expose how cultural constructs prescribe and reinforce the ideological status quo. So how much further can accepted norms on sexuality be demythologized and deconstructed? If in "The Werewolf" the grandmother is a werewolf, and in "The Company of Wolves" the girl embraces her animal nature and desires the wolf, in the final story, "Wolf-Alice," the protagonist behaves entirely like a wolf since she was "suckled by wolves" and "grew up with wild beasts."[40] While the second story shows the incorporation of animal into human, the protagonist in the third story has human form but lives only as an animal. This progression from human to animal suggests that Carter seeks to destabilize the domain of patriarchal binaries and reject any absolute categorization embedded in social convention. First, the child in "The Werewolf" is shown capable of behaviors associated with male dominance: self-defense, physical strength, living alone; then, in "The Company of Wolves" she becomes wedded to the masculine other, comfortable in a world dominated by instincts; finally, in "Wolf-Alice" she exists only as animal, without language or sense of time, her life regulated by bodily stimuli.

As a wolf, she has no way of communicating except through her senses: "nothing about her is human … she lives without a future … she always runs on all fours." Recovered from the den, Wolf-Alice stays briefly at a convent but the nuns find her "natural state" offensive so she is left at the

[39] Christina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 64.
[40] Angela Carter, "Wolf-Alice," pages 119-126. All textual references to this short story relate to the 1995 Vintage edition.

castle of a Duke but he is a "corpse-eater," a werewolf and ghoul from the old days. Referring to Carter's characters Marina Warner argues that they "have another self in wonderland, through the mirror, a not-self which defines them and gives them vitality."[41] Cohabiting with the other is not a concern for the protagonist in the third story, who, like Lewis Carroll's Alice, exists on the other side of the looking glass, that is, beyond the restrictions of socialization. At the end of this story the protagonist's care and compassion for the wounded Duke restores some of his humanity. Carter's characters in the fantasy world of fairy tales provoke us to reject identifiable patterns, disrupting our investment in binaries and our self-entrapment through the norms of socialization.[42] While the girl of the second story empathizes with the wolves, feral Wolf-Alice is herself, as a result of the lack of acculturation, primeval and elemental, prompting us to consider the effects of this return to primitive nature. As Bacchilega argues, Carter's "self-conscious exploration" problematizes "any either/or, inside/outside construction of gendered identity."[43] Carter's stories provide readers with the distance required to question and, like Red's clothes thrown into the fire, they encourage us to discard those culturally determined identities they so radically question.

Conclusion

This discussion began with Sexton's *Transformations*, but her version of *Little Red Riding Hood* with its focus on deception and a transvestite wolf denies the potential for a genuine transformation: performing gender is inescapable. Similarly, Broumas's speaker eschews the wolf and finds refuge in sisterhood but does not place any faith in the potential for change since most "flower-gathering sisters" are "lost." Only in Carter's radical fairy tale transformations, which inspire also Duffy's reworkings, are there paradigms of liberation from culturally determined gender roles. While the girl in "The Werewolf" yields a phallic knife against her grandmother, the "wise child" in "The Company of Wolves" never reaches for her knife but willingly provides a kiss; when gender roles disappear altogether in the final story, Wolf-Alice uses her tongue not to speak or declare her sexual desire

[41] Marina Warner, "Angela Carter," in *Essays on the Art of Angela Carter: Flesh and the Mirror* (London: Virago, 2007), 262.
[42] Some scholars, like Orenstein, consider that Carter's female characters oscillate between the "forms of human and beast" and are "by turns tender and aggressive" (Orenstein, *Uncloaked*, 168). My reading conceives of Carter's tales as far more radical in their rejection of binaries.
[43] Christina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 70.

but to lick the fiendish Duke's face "without disgust" and "with tender gravity," demonstrating compassion for the other can exist away from socialization. Still radical to this day, Carter's feminist fables constitute a self-conscious challenge to binary ideologies, inviting us to "demythologize" gendered norms, and constitute genuine transformations by offering the potential for empowerment through transcendence of established power dynamics.

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