

An Old Tale Given New Life: Queer Possibility (and Probability) in Little Red Riding Hood and
Its Retellings

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Introduction

To those of us who occupy spaces of marginalization, queer theorist Eve Sedgwick's method of *paranoid reading* might be intuitive. Paranoid reading is a way of defensively approaching a work, anticipating malice or violence to be contained within it. As Sedgwick writes, "if the violence ... cannot be definitively halted in advance, it must at least never arrive on any conceptual scene *as a surprise*. In a paranoid view, it is more dangerous for such reification ever to be unanticipated than often to be unchallenged" (Sedgwick 133). However, these paranoid reading strategies—despite being an oft necessary defense mechanism—are not the only way in which those with marginalized identities consume media.

Sedgwick also proposes *reparative reading*, which she defines as follows: "to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones" (146). Though this method of opening ourselves up to the possibility of being surprised is no better or worse than closing off that chance, it is just as necessary. By always expecting the worst, even in media claiming and attempting to represent us, we close ourselves off not only to the possibility of being hurt, but also to the possibility of being seen (Sedgwick 146).

The act of reparative reading, though, extends beyond just allowing ourselves to be pleasantly surprised. Looking specifically within queerness—which I will use going forward as an umbrella term encompassing all those who position their identities as existing outside of the cisheteropatriarchal societal standard—*queer coding* has existed long before we had the words to describe it. In the words of prominent queer theorists and folklore scholars Kay Turner and

Pauline Greenhill, “Queer people survive by learning to read implicitly coded messages—where even the presence of coding can be disputed, so that both senders and receivers can be protected from the consequences of their decodings. Queer readers learn to read signals that others cannot read” (14).

These codes, regardless of whether or not they were left intentionally by an author, are an essential part of the process through which queer people learn to understand themselves, their relationships, and the world. This is especially relevant in the case of children, who may find themselves drawn to queer coded characters or storylines before they even understand why. This tendency, which Kathryn Bond Stockton terms *growing sideways*, is a well-documented phenomenon. As Stockton writes: “Especially in relation to the children our law courts don’t believe in—overtly same-sex oriented children—the tendency of metaphor to reconfigure relations and time will prove why fictions ... uniquely nurture ideas of queer children. ... We are going to see that concepts of the queer child demand that we talk in terms of growing sideways” (279).

Today, politicians across the United States are fighting to ban queer books from public schools; the popularity of anti-queer and anti-trans rhetoric is on the rise; and very little is being done to educate children on the wide spectrum of human identity. In light of this systematic erasure and censorship, this idea of *non-literal representation* is more important than ever before. Because children across the country and the world are being raised without representative and inclusive media, the likelihood of them finding comfort in stories designed without them in mind is high. As Stockton suggests, the connection between queer and otherwise sideways children and fictional stories is strong, and will only continue to grow stronger as access to *literal* queer representation is further revoked (279).

Because fairy and folk tales exist as potentially the most prominent genre of children's media, the queer community's collective connection is no surprise. Take Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," for example. Featuring a young girl's transition from mermaid to human, this is a story that has become of profound significance to the trans community, particularly trans girls and women. Nat Hurley, in an essay on *perverse readings*, a phrase coined by Bonnie Zimmerman to describe the act of queerly interpreting literature, writes "this perverse reading of 'The Little Mermaid' and the appropriation of her iconography have clearly generated a powerful cultural story that transkids themselves have participated in producing" (127). Queer children, often subconsciously, engage in acts of perverse and reparative reading throughout their adolescence, gravitating toward stories like 'The Little Mermaid' and their transformational themes. In this sense, reparative reading extends beyond an intentional opening up of oneself to representative possibility, to include a subconscious connection with non-literal representation.

Though the literary tradition of folk and fairy tales is largely characterized by its surface-level insistence upon heteropatriarchal norms, it is also one which has captured significant attention from queer theorists and authors alike. And while the queer coded themes, storylines, and characters of Andersen's tales were largely reflective of his own queerness, those of the Grimms' and others' fairy tales were likely included unintentionally. These tales—throughout their many renditions—are ripe with queer possibility in their structure, storyline, and content. By engaging reparatively with these tales, we can not only understand the queer community's connection to it, but also highlight the ways in which the genre is inherently queer, even if non-literally.

Because of the genre's widespread focus on the coming-of-age of girls and women, as well as its general refusal to shy away from depictions of sex, it is no surprise that these tales

have garnered so many feminist retellings—and a few lesbian ones as well. As Lewis Siefert says of the genre, it “not only *represents* sexuality and kinship but also plays a crucial role in defining those representations as normal, especially for children” (15). In an essay on what she terms *fannish storytelling*, Jaime Roots takes a deep dive into some of these feminist retellings and the impetus behind them. In doing so, she makes the assertion that these fanworks and retellings are a testament not only to the longevity of the fairy tale genre, but also to the “possibilities that fan fiction opens up for women to offer different and even contradictory interpretations of the Grimms’ tales” (Roots, 408). Though her research has a more narrow focus on the nontraditional publishing route of *FanFiktion.de*, I believe that her claims can be extended 1) to the much broader collection of fairy tale reworkings published via other methods; and 2) beyond feminist- and woman-specific retellings.

My reparative and perverse perspective on these tales and their many derivatives stems largely from my own experiences as both a sideways child and a queer adult, and my own personal attachments to the fairy tale genre. In the coming pages, I will provide summary, background, and analysis of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s classic “Little Red Cap” and Charles Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood,” as well as retellings from Angela Carter, David Kaplan, and Julie Marie Wade. Though these authors, their histories, and their stories may not be inherently or intentionally queer, they do invite queer possibility into their retellings, opening the door for queer interpretation.

“Queering” & Fairy Tales

Though this thesis and its explanation of queering is largely centered on women and lesbian viewpoints specifically, the act of queering is certainly not reserved for lesbians alone. The process of inverting a text’s typical interpretation to include, center, and reaffirm *any and all*

queer perspectives is what is commonly referred to as “queering.” Whether intentional or unconscious, innate or developed over time, the concept of queering will be centrally featured in this work going forward. Given its centrality to my analysis, I believe that it is worth taking the time to justify, explain, and document the use of queering as a valid form of literary and cultural analysis.

To “queer” something is to turn it on its head and to form interpretations through a lens that is often counter to the societal norms or expectations in which a work exists. Usually, this counter-analysis takes place in the realm of sex and gender. In Zimmerman’s “Perverse Reading: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature,” she describes the ways in which lesbian-specific readings and interpretations of texts can imbue them with entirely different meanings than they would have otherwise possessed (139).

This process, which Zimmerman titularly dubbed *perverse reading*, involves sifting through subtext and deepening the given friendships and relationships between female characters. Much like traditional feminist interpretations, these perverse readings focus on the relationships between women. However, while feminist interpretations may still reserve some attention and analysis for male characters, the “perverse readings” of lesbian analysts often leave men out of the question entirely—or at the very least refuse to center them. Though feminist interpretations also tend to center women, there is much value to be found in the distinct and decidedly separate perspective of lesbians, given that their romantic and sexual attraction gives them a deeper and notably different understanding of women and other non-men (Zimmerman 138-39). As Zimmerman writes, “No firm line can be drawn between lesbian experience and other female experience. But many lesbians know—or believe we know—that we see women differently than do even the most feminist of heterosexual women” (138).

In reference to fairy tales specifically—which possess such strong social and cultural ties, especially considering their current use as the foundational tales of childhood—the act of queering also serves as a radical divestment from the cultural norms and expectations of the society responsible for disseminating the story. As renowned fairy tale scholar Maria Tatar says, “Our cultural stories are the products of unceasing negotiations between the creative consciousness of individuals and the collective sociocultural constructs available to them. These negotiations may be smooth or they may be troubled, but they always leave a mark on each version of a tale” (“Reinvention Through Intervention” 230). Whether by writing our own versions or by queerly interpreting existing versions, the act of queering fairy tales leaves that same mark. And especially when creating queer retellings—such as Emma Donoghue’s 1993 *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*—these actions create permanent and lasting change on the structure, morals, and canon of the genre.

The existing study of these alterations, while not extensive or complete, is compelling and valuable to the pursuit of further investigation. Among these works are those of Jack Zipes, whose vast scholarly catalog includes his book *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. In a chapter entitled “Inverting and Subverting the World with Hope: The Fairy Tales of George MacDonald, Oscar Wilde, and L. Frank Baum,” Zipes discusses the origins of fairy tales as a method of societal and class socialization and their subsequent evolution into radical or queer texts. As Zipes discusses, fairy tales remained centered upon traditional values and strict morality until the latter half of the nineteenth century. In the early 1800s, the fairy tale genre was highly picked through, edited, and censored to strengthen the bourgeoisie’s control of the public. By the 1860s, however, this was beginning to change; a group of authors in that era worked to collectively push the fairy tale genre away from its traditional norms and morals, embracing

more radical retellings (“Inverting and Subverting” 106-07). As Zipes puts it, “No longer was the fairy tale to be like the mirror, mirror on the wall reflecting the cosmetic bourgeois standards of beauty and virtue that appeared to be unadulterated and pure. The fairy tale and the mirror cracked into sharp-edged, radical parts by the end of the nineteenth century” (“Inverting and Subverting” 107). By rewriting the classic tales and working fairy tale themes into their own stories, the three authors Zipes focuses on embraced the genre’s power to disrupt normative structure, and expanded the genre to include alternative ways of life.

Under this premise, it only follows that as society shifts and changes, fairy tales and their perceptions and interpretations must *also* change in order to retain their value. In a society that grapples more and more with queerness in all of its forms—from the ongoing anti-heterosexist struggle under state and federal law, to the rise of calls for inclusive and educational children’s literature, and the fight to keep that literature available in schools—it is only to be expected that fairy tales *also* become concerned with queerness. These stories, in their capacity and history as countercultural texts, feel *familiar* to queer people. Just as the tales’ themes of otherness and transformation have appealed so prominently to feminists and other groups throughout history, they are now as easily applied and deeply resonant to queer people in our society.

In this context, to queer fairy tales is not something novel or modern; nor is it something dark or nefarious. It is, in the words of Disney’s colloquial retelling of Beauty and The Beast, a “tale as old as time.” Queer people have been reading, telling, and writing fairy tales for as long as the genre has been alive. The long evolution of fairy tales is not disparaged or undermined by their reworking or interpretation to include these identities; rather, their analysis as culturally relevant texts reaffirms the role that they serve as a living document, capable of change and growth. The fact that—thousands of years after their inception; across the lines of nation, class,

race, language, and gender—these stories hold any power to invoke or shift the perspective of a society or group *today* is the result of similar queering for as long as these stories have existed.

“A Tale As Old As Time” — Fairy Tales, Censorship, and the Brothers Grimm

Though Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm are far from the “origin” of the fairy tale genre, they are largely responsible for securing its persistent popularity. When the brothers first set out on their mission to compile fairy and folk tales, they did so as a method through which to preserve their German cultural tales (“Sex & Violence” 11). Despite the resulting collection’s title of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (or *Children’s and Household Tales*) and the fairy tale genre’s current status as children’s stories, the publication’s first iteration in 1812 was on the receiving end of a great deal of criticism regarding its largely inappropriate nature. In a proclaimed attempt to maintain the integrity of the original tales, they did very little censoring or sugar-coating, presenting the dark and sinister nature of these tales exactly as it was. And yet, when the collection was met with low sales and a great deal of controversy, they immediately caved, writing and releasing a ‘cleaner’ version (“Sex & Violence” 18).

In this second collection, the bloody and often violent aspect of the tales remained virtually unchanged, but great lengths had been taken to remove any elements that the brothers deemed unsuitable or immoral. In short: most mentions of pregnancy and childbirth were removed, and *all* references to premarital sex were taken out or rewritten to either teach the moral lesson not to engage in sex before marriage or imply marriage between any couple participating in sexual activity (“Sex & Violence” 7).

As the tales evolved and the brothers’ changes were met with more positive reviews, they became less and less interested in maintaining the integrity of the stories. They even went so far as to openly strive for the collection to serve as a “manual of manners” for children learning to

negotiate their place in society (“Sex & Violence” 19). As Tatar says, “Wilhelm Grimm rewrote the tales so extensively and went so far in the direction of eliminating off-color episodes that he can be credited with sanitizing folktales and thereby paving the way for the process that made them acceptable children’s literature in all cultures” (“Sex & Violence” 24).

Yet also despite the brothers’ staunch commitment to censorship and erasure, they did very little to stomp out the queer undercurrents running through the genre, even within their own sanitized collection of tales. As Turner and Greenhill write in the introduction to their groundbreaking work *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*, “if the Grimms and other earlier and later collectors attended vigilantly to the task of excising heterosex, they likely never even thought about ridding the tales of homosexual implications or other counternormative, counterhegemonic queer alliances” (2).

Transbiology & The Revisionist History of “Little Red Cap”

Though transgender-specific themes (i.e. cross-dressing or sex change) are entirely absent from the Grimms’ vast collection, themes of what theorists—such as Jack Halberstam, Myra Hird, and Noreen Giffney to name a few—have dubbed *transbiology* are heavily featured (Turner and Greenhill 5). Probably the two most immediately recognizable instances of this are frog-to-man in what we know today as “The Princess and the Frog” and man-to-beast in “Beauty and the Beast.” However, *transbiology* as theorists and scholars use it today goes far beyond the black-and-white binary of man and animal—especially within the context of the fairy tale. As explained by Turner and Greenhill, “The fairy tale, like myth, imaginatively anticipates the transbiological wonders and worries of today. Transbiology here includes animals or humans who masquerade as or transform into another species (in whole or in part) and/or who otherwise

mess with the hard-and-fast distinctions between species, including between human and non-human” (5-6).

In this sense, all of the Grimms’ tales—as well as those of other fairy and folk tale writers—are full of inclusions of transbiology and other trans themes, even after being expurgated and sugar-coated into the children’s tales of today. Let’s take the Little Red Riding Hood tale type, for example.

In this tale, not only is the wolf personified as a man—with the ability to speak, reason, and trick—but he even goes so far as to impersonate Little Red Riding Hood’s human grandmother. In this way, the wolf represents and becomes both man *and* wolf. And he is such a convincing actor that Little Red Riding Hood believes him and—in Charles Perrault’s version of the story—even crawls into bed with him. Perrault writes, “Little Red Riding-hood undressed herself and went into bed, where she was much surprised to see how her grandmother looked in her night-clothes” (82). In some versions, Perrault solidifies this man-wolf status even further, summing up the tale with a moral lesson for young girls:

The Wolf, I say here, for you'll find
Wolves are many, and vary in kind;
There are some, easy-mannered and tame,
Without malice, or temper, the same,
Most obliging and sweet in their way,
Like to follow their tender young prey,
And will track them right into their homes—lack-a-day!
Who among us has not learnt by this time to know,
The most dangerous of wolves is the soft, smooth-tongued foe! (Perrault 28).

Here, Perrault suggests that the wolf is analogous to man. In his warning, he suggests that the most dangerous kind of man is he who appears non-threatening, and that girls and women should beware the “smooth-tongued foe” (Perrault 28). Perrault—who wrote and published his version of what he called *The Tales of Mother Goose* or *Tales of Passed Times* roughly 100 years

before the Grimms first published their own collection—also chose to omit the happy ending present in other versions so as to strengthen this warning.

In the Grimms' later version, first published in 1812, Little Red Cap does not go so far as to crawl into her grandmother's bed with the wolf—and even experiences some degree of trepidation about the “very strange” appearance of her grandmother—but she is nonetheless convinced enough by his performance that she wanders close enough to be eaten. As Zipes writes in his translated collection of the Grimms' tales: “No sooner did the wolf say that than he jumped out of bed and gobbled up poor Little Red Cap. After the wolf had the fat chunks in his body, he lay down in bed again, fell asleep, and began to snore very loudly” (Grimm and Grimm 87). However, again straying from Perrault's earlier version, the brothers chose to include the happy ending, with a nearby hunter hearing the wolf's snores and coming to investigate, and ultimately to rescue Little Red Cap and her grandmother. In some translations of later versions, the man calls the wolf a “sinner,” implying some level of Christian or Catholic influence while again asserting the anthropomorphism of the creature.

The Grimms, like Perrault, also include a moral at the end of the tale, writing “It's also been told that Little Red Cap returned to her grandmother one day to bring some baked goods” (87) and depicting the girl ignoring a second wolf who tries to lure her off the path. In this way, they convey the same message that young girls should be wary of wolves—or, more realistically, men—who might attempt to take advantage of them.

Little Red Cap: An Agent or a Victim?

Like many girls and women in traditional fairy tales, Little Red Cap (or Little Red Riding Hood, depending on who you ask) is given very little agency. From the get-go, she is portrayed as a “sweet little maiden” who “promised to obey her mother” (Grimm and Grimm 85) and to

stay on the path as she traveled to her grandmother's house with a basket of wine and cake. When she first encounters the wolf, it is said that "Little Red Cap didn't know what a wicked sort of an animal he was and was not afraid of him" (Grimm and Grimm 85). After all, she was warned to stay on the path so as to avoid falling, not strangers or animals or tricks. Unsuspecting of the wolf's motives, she tells him exactly where she's going, what she's bringing, and how to get to her grandmother's house. And, selfless and naive, she falls easily into the wolf's trap. "She plunged into the woods to look for flowers. And each time she plucked one, she thought she saw another even prettier flower and ran after it, going deeper and deeper into the forest" (Grimm and Grimm 86).

Meanwhile, the wolf—who again demonstrates the transitory nature of his character by dressing in the grandmother's clothes after "[gobbling] her up"—heads straight to the grandmother's house to plot the consumption of Little Red Cap. Once she has plucked more flowers than she can carry, the girl makes her way to her grandmother's house and only barely pauses when she finds the door open. "She was puzzled when she found the door open, and as she entered the room, it seemed so strange inside" (Grimm and Grimm 86). Even upon noticing the strange appearance and big ears, eyes, hands, and mouth of her 'grandmother,' she does not hesitate and is eaten with the same ease as her grandmother.

Not only is Little Red Cap given no sense of critical thought or reasoning skills, she also requires a man to save her. And even once she has been saved, her first thought is not gratitude or excitement, but rather "Never again will you stray from the path by yourself and go into the forest when your mother has forbidden it" (Grimm and Grimm 87). She is given little to no agency or independent thought, learning only to obey her mother rather than to assess her situations wisely.

In “Little Red Cap,” the Grimms present and popularize the image of a perfect, rule-following “maiden” who never strays from the societal path laid out before her, and who is not tempted by unsuitable men. Given this decidedly un-feminist message—as well as the common appropriation of fairy tales by men seeking to further enforce our societal patriarchy—it is no surprise that feminist retellings of “Little Red Cap” and “Little Red Riding Hood” are fairly common.

Radical Reimaginings: Queerish Retellings of the Classic Tale

Perhaps most notably, Angela Carter’s “Wolf Trilogy” in her collection of retellings *The Bloody Chamber* explores the possibility of a more Oedipal Little Red, a willing participant in intimacy with the wolf, and herself a feral wolf-girl. In Carter’s text, she melds fairy tales with psychoanalytic, feminist, and literary theories in order to both deconstruct and complicate the common cultural themes held within the genre. As Kimberly J. Lau writes in the introduction to her analytical book *Erotic Infidelities: Love and Enchantment in Angela Carter’s The Bloody Chamber*, “Carter’s stories are rich with paradox and play; they delight with their clever interventions into patriarchal narrative legacies and theoretical inheritances even as they disturb with their attention to women’s complicity in such oppressive structures” (4). David Kaplan’s short film “Little Red Riding Hood” portrays what might have happened if Little Red Riding Hood had been given more agency over her body and her actions, serving as a curious and consenting participant in the somewhat-androgynous wolf’s intimacies. Julie Marie Wade’s experimental mix of poetry and prose “Maidenhead” uses Red in conjunction with girls and women from other tales to deconstruct virginity, patriarchy, and sexuality.

Though these are just a few of many examples, they form an essential basis from which the impact of feminist, queer, and other retellings can be analyzed. As Tatar writes, “Working

through a story by amending, excising, and transforming it creates opportunities for a new understanding of the constraints imposed on us by our culture, yet it also provides a dress rehearsal for resisting those constraints in real life” (“Reinvention Through Intervention” 237). Fairy tales are ripe with social energy, shaping the worldview of children and adults alike. It’s high time those of us with marginalized identities are given a moment in the folkloric spotlight.

Maidenhead: Tying the Tales Together

Poet and essayist Julie Marie Wade’s short story “Maidenhead” is, perhaps, the crowning jewel of queer interpretations of Little Red Riding Hood. In it, she ties in her character Red with the stories of so many other fairy tale girls and women. “It all begins with Red,” she writes. “She was a good girl, couldn’t have been more than twelve or thirteen, nothing on her mind but an innocent visit to Grandmother’s house” (Wade 96). Here, she describes the girl in a familiar way. However, she goes on to instead paint a picture much different from that which we are told to believe, writing: “She isn’t afraid of her body, like they tell us in books. She likes it: little sounds it makes, way it bends into the wind and curls up on the bed and climbs things, straddles them. She thinks to herself *I’m part boy and part cat, I can do anything*, and thinking this way, she can” (Wade 96). Red is not a naive, innocent, vulnerable girl. She is strong and curious and exploring her budding sexuality. She is also taking on the transbiological characteristics typically assigned to the wolf; she is not just a girl—she is also a boy and a cat, an animal often gendered as a feminine opposite of the more masculine canine.

From here, Wade departs into a mix of verse and prose, creating a story structure that is inherently queer. She gives fragments of the lives of girls and women throughout the United States; their locations are purposely ambiguous, emphasizing the commonality of these scenes across locales. She shares the story of a girl learning about the “irreplaceable gift of [her]

girlhood” (Wade 97). In another section of the text, a woman is playfully given a garter before her wedding day, while another breaks out in hives. Sex is both encouraged and warned against. Wade writes of the paradox of womanhood and societal expectation. Then, she brings in other fairy tales.

Reminiscent of *Sleeping Beauty*, an only-child named Rose is sheltered from all “unclean thoughts” and “bodily desires” (Wade 101), until she finally escapes and finds herself introduced to the world. Wade writes, “In the morning when she woke, for the first time she knew she was really awake: splintered as a sand dollar, unsure who to blame, but finally and truly awake” (Wade 102). Whether this is an allusion to the protective walls of her parents’ overprotection being shattered or an analogy for sexual activity physically splitting her open (or both), this suggests that—especially in cases of the overprotection of queer children—a partial loss of innocence is often positive. Wade then likens Rapunzel to a nun, after sharing a scene of a Catholic school nun trying to teach sex ed to a group of young girls. She has not shaved her head like the other nuns, though, and after being seen by a passing minstrel, she asks him to climb her tower, thinking that she can seduce him into keeping her secret. When he reaches the top, he pulls away his disguise and reveals a priest’s collar just before severing her hair. “Rapunzel’s hair, which plummeted to the earth, unbinding in flight and scattering as sheaves of wheat among the birds assembled below. At the same moment, the bedside mirror cracked. Rapunzel reached for a shard of glass, wherein her brown eyes blazed suddenly, unabashedly, *blue*” (Wade 106). The severing of Rapunzel’s hair by a priest can be read as analogous to the ways in which evangelicalist religion is often used to smother that which makes us different—in this case, queerness and refusal to assimilate. However, her eyes flashing blue at the end instead of brown indicates that this difference cannot be removed, but rather is innate.

In another, parallel scene, two girls have a similar sex talk to that of the nuns, though this time they're concerned with lesbians. Wade writes, "Heather and Sara were, plainly put, *different* from other girls" (108). This, aside from being indicative of Stockton's theory of growing sideways, is also a common sentiment among queer and lesbian girls, often even before they've come to understand their identity. In another scene, *The Little Mermaid* becomes a woman whose failed first sexual encounter leaves her both a virgin and not. "The failed seduction carries a penalty. She cannot remain human, and she cannot return to the sea. Not as she was. Water now, flooding the bridge..." (Wade 113). At the end, the story devolves into a series of questions, reminiscent of a word association game which Wade calls *The Rorschach*. The questions, which go on for two pages or so, eventually end in the following exchange:

"Iron—"
 "Maiden."
 "Maiden—"
 "Red."
 "Music—"
 "Ocean."
 "Body—"
 "Story."
 "Virgin—"
 "Seashell."
 "Story—"
 "Golden."
 "Truth—"
 "Tenuous."
 "Safe—"
 "Red." (Wade 116-17)

By bracketing this collection of stories about women's agency, female desire, and dismantling patriarchy with mentions of Red, Wade reclaims *Little Red Riding Hood* as both a feminist text and a queer one. By ending with associating Red and safety, she implies that Red is safe in this interpretation, saved from the harmful hands of men who have historically stripped her of her agency and her sexuality. She is safe in her story, her desires, her queerness.

Wolf-Alice

In Angela Carter's "Wolf-Alice," her version of the girl becomes far more bestial than she is in the canonized tale, taking on a wolfish persona of her own. Abandoned or lost by her human mother, Wolf-Alice is adopted by a pack of wolves who raise her as if she were their own; and though she certainly lives within the body of a human child, the girl is described as though she were an animal. "Nothing about her is human except that she is *not* a wolf; it is as if the fur she thought she wore had melted into her skin and become part of it, although it does not exist" (Carter 184). This immediate separation from humanity continues throughout the tale, strengthened by the early statement "her pace is not our pace" (Carter 183). Though context suggests that this statement should be taken literally, in reference to the way she trots or gallops rather than walking, it is rich with potential for queer interpretation. Aside from being indicative of a sense of queer time, this description is also reminiscent of Stockton's theory of *growing sideways*. Wolf-Alice, like Stockton's sideways children, is inherently separate from her peers, literally growing differently. Here, this idea is taken to the extreme, with Wolf-Alice growing to walk on all fours, howl like a wolf, etc. "Her pace is not *our* pace," with 'our' referring to the normative humans in society at large. Additionally, the sentiment seems to me to echo the queer idiom of "playing for the other team," insinuating that she is different and separate from society, both literally and metaphorically.

When her wolf foster mother is killed by hunters—her body a "bullet-riddled corpse," suggesting the excessive violence of the men who shot her—Wolf-Alice fights against her false-rescuers; and when the nuns she is placed with try to teach her to express gratitude for her 'saviors,' she "arched her back, pawed the floor, retreated to a far corner of the chapel, crouched, trembled, urinated, defecated—reverted entirely, it would seem, to her natural state" (Carter

184-85). This idea of the girl's 'natural state' being non-human again suggests a sense of queerness. Despite attempts to force her to conform to society, to express gratitude to the men who 'saved' her, nothing can truly alter her identity or her natural way of life. Her queer wolfishness is innate; and she is able to use her abject, primal queerness as a form of resistance to normativity and the nun's "civilizing" forces.

In retaliation for this reversion, the nuns send the girl away and "without a qualm, this nine days' wonder and continuing embarrassment of a child was delivered over to the bereft and unsanctified household of the Duke" (Carter 185). The Duke is also situated very firmly outside of the societal standard, and in an essay on what she terms *beastly girls*, author and scholar Veronica Schanoes describes him as "a man who may or may not be a werewolf, who may or may not be a vampire, but who most definitely is a ghoul, eats the dead, and does not cast an image in the mirror" (31). As Carter describes him in the story, "he passed through the mirror and now, henceforward, lives as if upon the other side of things" (185). This inherent otherness, this sense of inverted humanity, echoes the earlier description of Wolf-Alice who is both not-wolf and not-human, and who experiences the world at a different pace than the rest of society. These characters are both monsters, outcasts.

This sense of queer difference only grows as Wolf-Alice reaches maturation, as it often does in the real world. As a feminist writer, many of Carter's tales focus on the transition from girl- to womanhood and the effects this can have on a young woman's life. Here, she shares the story of the wolf-girl's first menstruation, writing:

The moon had been shining into the kitchen when she woke to feel the trickle between her thighs and it seemed to her that a wolf who, perhaps, was fond of her, as wolves were, and who lived, perhaps, in the moon? must have nibbled her cunt while she was sleeping, had subjected her to a series of affectionate nips too gentle to wake her yet sharp enough to break the skin (Carter 188).

Especially considering the biological drive of wolves to reproduce, her assumption here that a wolf “nibbled her cunt” is interesting, and indicative of queer desire in her. Wolf-Alice fashions clumsy diapers for herself out of abandoned ball gowns in the forgotten closets of the house of the not-wolf, not-man with whom she had been placed, alienated from her womanhood and an understanding of her body’s biological processes. Shortly thereafter, she discovers the Duke’s mirror, in which he does not cast a reflection. Seeing herself displayed within it, Wolf-Alice believes that she has stumbled upon a potential playmate and friend, rather than just a facsimile of herself. “She rubbed her head against her reflected face, to show that she felt friendly towards it, and felt a cool, solid, immovable surface between herself and she—some kind, possibly, of invisible cage? In spite of this barrier, she was lonely enough to ask this creature to try to play with her, baring her teeth and grinning; at once she received a reciprocal invitation” (Carter 189). Eventually, as the night falls and moonlight begins to play across her skin in the mirror, “she wondered whether there she saw the beast who came to bite her in the night” (Carter 189).

This connection is near-explicitly queer on several levels. As introduced earlier, when Wolf-Alice first began to bleed, she considered the possibility that “a wolf who, perhaps, was fond of her, as wolves were ... must have nibbled her cunt while she was sleeping” (Carter 188). To attribute this sexual fondness to a woman—especially one who she believes to be separate from herself—indicates that on some level Wolf-Alice is open to, if not excited by, the potential for sexual intimacy between herself and her perceived playmate. Next, as more signals of sexual maturity make themselves clear in Wolf-Alice’s body, she not only familiarizes herself with the touch of her new body, but also continues to return to the wolf-girl in the mirror. “To her astonishment, she found a little diadem of fresh hairs tufting between her thighs. She showed it to her mirror littermate, who reassured her by showing her she shared it” (Carter 191). Finally,

the association of the moon—which is often interpreted as a source of feminine energy—with Wolf-Alice’s maturation and the more sexual aspects of her relationship with the girl in the mirror, implies a sense of feminine desire. When she menstruates for the first time, “the moon had been shining into the kitchen when she woke to feel the trickle between her thighs,” which prompted the theory of a wolf’s overeager oral sex. Then, when she first interacts with the girl in the mirror, it is not until “the moonlight spilled into the Duke’s motionless bedroom from behind a cloud” onto her skin that Wolf-Alice connects the mirror-girl with the sex act (Carter 188-89). Just a page later, she becomes aware for the first time of an “essential difference” between herself and the world around her as she considers her foster mother and her own status as a not-wolf-nor-girl, again suggestive of Stockton’s theory of *growing sideways*.

Kaplan’s Queer Red Riding Hood

David Kaplan’s short film *Little Red Riding Hood* provides yet another example of a retelling, though his is based on a less well-known version of the classic tale, “The Story of Grandmother.” In it, Kaplan invokes an immediate sense of queer time; though the film was released in 1997, it emulates the aesthetic of early black-and-white silent films, overlaid with gentle, classical music and the narration of prominent gay actor Quentin Crisp. As fairy tale and queer scholar Jennifer Orme writes in her analysis of the film, “the offscreen voice-over narration is carried out by Quentin Crisp, an important early gay celebrity. In order for this aspect of queer possibility to be activated, the viewer needs specific knowledge of these gay cultural icons who challenged heteronormativity in the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century” (100-01). This, from the get-go, is suggestive of a certain *code* making the queerness of the film available only to those who are—or were at the time of the film’s release—in-the-know.

But the queerness of the film extends far beyond the involvement of Crisp, who is never pictured, and onto the screen as well. Though the relationship and any desire which exists between the girl and the wolf appears heterosexual on the surface, it still acts to disrupt the normative heterosexual expectations. In the words of Orme: “the privileging of the girl’s gaze, the representation of the wolf as a tightly costumed, mildly androgynous Goth-boy danseur, and his sexual innocence and curiosity create space for a queer reading that recognizes this version of the tale as disruptive of heteronormative assumptions about male-female sexual relations and desire” (92). The wolf character, though referred to as male, is unsexed—his tight costume leaving little to the imagination and displaying a clear absence of genitals. As Orme writes, “His costume both emphasizes and hides his masculinity; he is both wolf and man and neither” (Orme 98). This, in conjunction with his long hair, wide eyes, and graceful movements—as well as his eventual cross-dressing when he takes on the disguise of the girl’s grandmother—creates a very ambiguously gendered character. In fact, when the wolf first appears on-screen rolling in the grass, it is easy to perceive him as a woman at first glance.

This inclusion of transbiological and transgender themes opens a wide door for queer interpretations of the girl, whose desire and fascination for the wolf are shown openly. Before he first notices her, the girl watches the wolf, enthralled, as he dances sensually in a clearing in the forest. Later, when she arrives at her grandmother’s house and hears the wolf speak in place of the old woman, it is clear from the way she turns and looks at him that she knows he is not her real grandmother. Yet, she still does as he instructs and sits down at the table to eat what he has left for her in a bowl, even after the grandmother’s cat says “a slut is she who eats the flesh of her granny” (Kaplan). When the wolf instructs her to remove her clothes and get in bed with him, she performs a striptease for him, removing each piece of clothing one by one and throwing

them into the fire. The wolf, dressed in her grandmother's clothes and again looking decidedly feminine, watches with eyes equal parts nervous and excited from above the blanket pulled up to his face. By dressing the already androgynous wolf in the woman's clothes, it becomes very easy to read him *as* a woman, adding an explicit sense of lesbian suggestion to an already queer scene. Additionally, the sense of anxious excitement experienced by the wolf in this moment as he watches the girl with uninterrupted attention is one bordering on nearly universal amongst lesbians engaging in queer sex for the first time.

A perverse reading (or viewing, in this case) of this scene is especially resonant during the performance of the standard 'what big hands/eyes/mouth/etc you have' exchange—given the lesbian coding inherent in the girl's interest and excitement in the wolf's 'big hands.' Additionally during this exchange, the girl flirts with the nervous wolf and repeatedly calls him "granny"—again indicative of the lesbian suggestion of the scene—and the two nearly kiss before the girl declares that she must go outside to "make caca" (8:04). Once outside the house, she ties the string attached to her ankle to a nearby plum tree and hides, eating a fruit, as the wolf eventually comes looking for her. She watches as he laments her disappearance, holding the trunk of the tree in his arms, before throwing the plum at him. The two set off on a chase—the girl running through the forest wrapped only in a sheet and the wolf leaping ballet-like behind her.

Though Kaplan's film, like other adaptations of the tale, has been criticized for playing into the violent, rape-centric, and pedophilic undertones of the source material, I contend that he does the opposite. In his own analysis of the film, Zipes writes "there is nothing ambiguous about the emphasis of the film: it focuses on female desire and a female gaze that rejoice in a young woman's artful and playful way in which she seduces an androgynous wolf" ("The

Enchanted Screen” 151). In this film, despite common portrayals of the wolf, he is *not* the instigator. He is shy and timid, often looking at the girl as if he were afraid—or at the very least intimidated. Yet there is certainly not a sublimation of roles; the girl is not a predator, she is just a girl acting on her desires, as demonstrated by their mutual, if nervous, engagement in sexual scenes. Kaplan, in his own commentary on the film, says that it is “about a young woman who is really putting a toe in the water and exploring and celebrating her sexuality without sordidness. And she remains in control. She doesn’t have to be rescued by a huntsman, nor is she punished for this exploration, which is in direct contrast to the better known versions of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm” (Kaplan).

In order to grasp the relationship displayed in Kaplan’s film, we must put aside our preconceived notions of the predator-prey relationship often shown in the tale. “When we suspend the expectations of the relationship between the girl and the wolf that assume one of them must be a predator and the other prey, we can see that the relationship in Kaplan’s film is not about domination. It is flirtatious, playful, and consensual” (Orme 94). The confident, sensual girl and the timid, feminine wolf are equally invested in their relations; and the implied sex at the end of the film—with the final scene showing a close-up of the girl’s face as the wolf drags a claw down her nose and lips—consummates a decidedly queer relationship.

The Company of Wolves

In “The Company of Wolves,” Carter opens with stories of a forest full of wolves, where all humans are prey. “The wolfsong is the sound of the rending you will suffer, in itself a murdering” (Carter 168). In this forest, any misstep off of the path will result in being eaten, and the children of the village and its neighbors learn very early to carry knives on their person at all times. Though the story opens with no indication of the humanity contained within these wolfish

bodies, it becomes clear early on that these wolves have human qualities. “Fear and flee the wolf; for, worst of all, the wolf may be more than he seems” (Carter 169). Putting the more human pronoun ‘he’ aside, this idea of the wolf being *more* than he seems is suggestive of his humanity and, thus, his transbiological nature. The wolves in these opening anecdotes are also imbued with very human emotions, as Carter suggests that sadness and melancholy are inherent to their conditions. The very wolfsong which was early described as a harbinger of death, is also portrayed as such: “That long-drawn, wavering howl has, for all its fearful resonance, some inherent sadness in it, as if the beasts would love to be less beastly if only they now how and never cease to mourn their own condition. There is a vast melancholy in the canticles of the wolves, melancholy infinite as the forest, endless as these long nights of winter” (Carter 171). And every time a wolf is killed, his body is transformed into that of a man—the man he once was—indicating a clear transbiological nature.

In direct contrast to the melancholic wolf, the protagonist of this tale is a young girl who “has been too much loved ever to feel scared” (Carter 173). In her description of the girl, Carter focuses on the budding sexual aspects of the pubescent girl, highlighting the sexuality and sensuality of her body, while also emphasizing its closedness. “She stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is 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; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing” (Carter 173). As Lau writes, “Carter’s description plays up Little Red Riding Hood’s childlike desirability, and her virginity is fundamental to that desirability” (85).

As she enters the forest on her way to visit her grandmother, the woods are described as though they were a living thing, swallowing up the girl as she enters. When she encounters a

hunter, described as very handsome, the two of them continue on together—her trust of him immediate. She even allows him to carry her basket, despite the fact that her knife lays inside it. Eventually, though, he suggests leaving the path, claiming that his compass would get them to her grandmother’s house faster. They separate, wagering a kiss for whoever gets there first, and the girl takes care to slow her pace so as to ensure that the hunter will win. The grandmother is a pious religious woman, and Carter makes the assertion that “we keep the wolves outside by living well” (176). That, however, is of no use to the grandmother who is quickly eaten by the hunter, who strips naked before consuming her. Here, the wolf-man is given the same sexualizing treatment as the girl earlier in the story: “He strips off his shirt. His skin is the colour and texture of vellum. A crisp stripe of hair runs down his belly, his nipples are ripe and dark as poison fruit but he's so thin you could count the ribs under his skin if only he gave you the time. He strips off his trousers and she can see how hairy his legs are. His genitals, huge” (Carter 177).

When the girl arrives, he traps her and the song of other wolves can be heard outside the house. Carter writes, “Since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid” (179). Playing into her virginal desirability, the girl takes off each article of her clothing slowly—just as she did in Kaplan’s iteration of the tale—teasing the wolf as she throws each one into the fire before moving to give the hunter/wolf the kiss that she owes him. When faced with the ever-present ‘all the better to eat you with’ interaction, “the girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody’s meat” (Carter 181). She burns his clothes as well, and the two partake in what Carter terms a “savage marriage ceremony” before, at the end of the story, “sweet and sound she sleeps in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf” (Carter 181).

By establishing herself as “nobody’s meat” and positioning herself as the initiator of the sexual encounter, the girl takes back the agency so often stripped from her in other tellings of the

Little Red Riding Hood tale. She even burns the wolf-man's clothes which—as Carter establishes earlier in the story—will trap him permanently in his bestial form. As Lau writes, “Little Red Riding Hood opts for the bestial, and Carter seems to suggest that such a choice also reveals Little Red Riding Hood's own animal drives” (88). While some critics have claimed this scene as an embrace of rape culture and a further portrayal of the girl as a victim, I argue that it is in fact more of an embrace of the animal nature of the girl. Her desire for the man-wolf was clear from the moment she met the hunter, and she is not just going along with his advances, but actually initiating those advances herself. Not only that, but Carter writes that the girl wants to lay his head in her lap and eat the lice from his pelt, implying the same animal urges and bestial desires. While she may have initially been acting out of fear, this fantasy is certainly not an extension of that, and demonstrates the girl's true wishes. This embrace of her non-normative desires is an embrace of queerness in and of itself.

The Werewolf

Angela Carter's story “The Werewolf” begins not with wolves but with witches. In this small, cold town where the tale takes place, women who do not conform to the societal standard are persecuted and stoned to death. Without transition, the girl is introduced—sent on a five-mile walk through the forest to her grandmother's house. “The good child,” as Carter describes her (166), follows her mother's orders without question and brings along her father's hunting knife for protection. She is not afraid, as many other children likely would be; this is a journey she's taken many times before. “She knew the forest too well to fear it, but she must always be on her guard” (Carter 166). When she encounters a wolf, it is “a huge one, with red eyes and running, grizzled chops; any but a mountaineer's child would have died of fright at the sight of it” (Carter 166). She, though, faces off with it, slicing off its right forepaw with her knife without hesitation.

“The wolf let out a gulp, almost a sob, when it saw what had happened to it,” writes Carter, “wolves are less brave than they seem” (166). Here, she carries on the transbiological themes of the Grimms’ and Perrault’s wolves, portraying it as capable of experiencing and expressing human emotion. In Carter’s story, the girl picks up the severed paw and continues along her path, wiping the blade clean on her apron. When the girl finally arrives at the house, her grandmother is feverish and ill. Rummaging through her basket to care for her grandmother, the girl finds that the wolf’s paw has transformed into a human hand—her *grandmother’s* human hand. The neighbors, hearing the girl’s cries of distress as she holds her down with the knife, stone the grandmother to death as a witch. At the end of the story, the girl ultimately moves into her grandmother’s house and, in Carter’s words, prospers.

Here, Carter turns the typical warning of the tale on its head asking instead, as Lau puts it: “If the Little Red Riding Hood tales consistently warn young girls to stay clear of predatory men, ‘wolves’ in the longstanding vernacular tradition, what might Carter be saying in casting the grandmother in the traditional role of male sexual predator?” (Lau 82). Lau argues that by “transgendering” the grandmother to play the traditionally-male role of predator, Carter creates what she calls a *phallic mother*. Under this theory, the grandmother’s wolf form represents the traditional male, phallic predator; and when her identity is discovered by the girl, she becomes nothing more than a shrieking old woman, her “phallus” false. In the end, after all, she is stoned as a witch, *not* a wolf. “In her moment of exposure, Granny no longer embodies the transsexuality of her werewolf persona but becomes simply witch, categorically ‘some old woman’” (Lau 83). The grandmother is used to transcend gender binaries and boundaries, existing as a werewolf, a witch, *and* a woman. As Lau writes, “she cannot be contained by the singularity of any given category” (83).

While I find Lau's theory of the grandmother as a sort of phallic mother somewhat reductionist and, arguably, slightly transphobic in its strict adherence to phallic maleness, I do embrace the transbiological nature of the grandmother, as well as the somewhat genderfluid status of the girl. By having the grandmother exist outside of the societal binary—taking up space as woman, werewolf, *and* witch—Carter creates a fluid, indefinable, and inherently genderfucked character. And by taking her place at the end of the story, the girl takes on and embraces that same fluidity in her own way.

Throughout the story, the girl is positioned as separate from others her age. She is fearless, even in situations wherein other children would literally die of fright. She has mastered the use of her father's knife and become herself a hunter in the process—a gender subversion of her own. And while the girl may not necessarily be responsible for the death of her grandmother, she does literally take her place at the end of the tale, moving into her house and thriving in her newfound solitude. Newly unburdened by the confines of society, she is now free to assume the role of separate from her family and from society—her own, queer happily ever after.

Queerily Ever After

Despite recent growth in the fields of queer and trans studies and the ever-expanding catalog of queer literary analysis, the fairy tale genre is one which has largely been left behind. As I set out on this project, I was rather alarmed to discover that Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill's *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* is one of the only scholarly books out there dedicated entirely to the queer analysis of fairy and folk tales. Though I did eventually find my way to a collection of essays and articles published across several editions of the WSU Press journal *Marvels & Tales*, I still couldn't help but notice a serious dearth in the work being done on the genre.

Fairy tales *are* queer—in structure, in content, in theme. At its core, the genre is one of transformation and transition, of coming-of-age and sexual discovery. And to continue to ignore the queer possibility inherent in the genre is to do a disservice to the generations of queer and trans individuals who have found solace in its tales.

The Little Red Riding Hood tale type is one facing a significant lack of attention from queer and trans theorists and scholars. While some of the tale's more modern retellings have received some attention, the canonized tale popularized by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm remains largely untouched. Even in queer collections of fairy tale retellings like Daniel M. Lavery's *The Merry Spinster* and Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch*, the tale goes unmentioned. Despite this, the queer undercurrents in the tale are strong and worthy of being analyzed.

In structuring this piece, I chose to start with an analysis of the Perrault's and the Grimms' canonized versions of the tale—demonstrating the inherent queerness present in not only the transbiological wolf, but also in the girl meant to represent society's "perfect maiden." Then, by ordering the five analyzed and examined retellings from most to least obviously queer—beginning with Wade's "Maidenhead" and ending with Carter's "The Werewolf"—I show the ways in which the queerness of these works is built upon themes *already present* in the canonized texts. These retellings were not born from thin air. Rather, they pull the basic structures and plotlines from their normative source material and turn them on their heads. No longer is the wolf just a predator, or the girl just a model for society's heterosexist gender roles. And whether these tales are explicitly and intentionally queer, as is the case in Wade's "Maidenhead," they are full of queer possibility—even just in their status as subversions of the canonized tales.

By applying my own reparative and perverse perspective to Little Red Riding Hood and a few of its many variants, I have merely scratched the surface of the vast queer potential of this tale, as well as all the others which inhabit our shared and living library of fairy tales. A Much of our source material for the genre is, at its core, misogynistic and violent—existing as a manual for staying within society’s expectations. When we take this and reinterpret it for our own means, we sap the power from stories designed to hurt us and use it for our own benefit. When we rewrite them and share them with the world, we give credence to our identities and communities, creating a manual of our own.

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