The Erotic Transformation of Little Red Riding Hood from an Object to a Subject:
Metatextuality Within “The Company of Wolves” and “Little Red Riding Hood”

Charles Perrault's classical version of “Little Red Riding Hood” is often subject to criticism in regards to the character portrayal of Little Red Riding Hood (Little Red). In particular, feminist and psychoanalytic theorists frequently comment on Little Red's stereotypical role as the helpless heroine who is nothing more than an object of sexual desire. A primary example is Angela Carter's fairy tale “The Company of Wolves,” as it presents a psychoanalytic-feminist critique of Perrault's “Little Red Riding Hood.” In doing so, Carter demonstrates the use of metatextuality, whereby one text is commenting on another text from a critical perspective. In relation to the character Little Red, Carter creates a sexually developing female that is aware of her own sexual potential and animal tendencies. By providing a female protagonist who initiates and engages in sexual relations with the male wolf, Carter allows for the possibility of perceiving a female as a subject rather than an object. Through the use of metatextual relationships, Carter directly rejects the premises/morals of Perrault's “Little Red Riding Hood,” while simultaneously creating a strong, intelligent, and sexually dominant female character.

Perrault characterizes Little Red in simplistic terms. She is “a little country girl, the prettiest creature who was ever seen” (Perrault). Besides her overall beauty, the only other description Perrault provides is that “[t]his good woman has a little red riding hood” and
“everybody call[s] her Little Red Riding Hood.” Unfortunately, this lack of development produces a female who is subject to a great deal of victim blaming (Wu 58). When the wolf confronts Little Red and asks specific questions about her destination, she freely provides the answers without hesitation, resulting in her death. Perrault clearly provides a moral to the story:

Children, especially attractive, well bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say “wolf,” but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all.

It is quite clear that Perrault is criticizing the beauty and innocence of Little Red. More specifically, there is a sexually explicit nature to this warning. In suggesting that young, beautiful girls must be careful when charming men pursue them within households and on streets, one cannot avoid the obvious parallel between this advice, sexual predation, and female promiscuity. Perrault is not directing this moral at the predators; instead he assumes this vulnerability is a consequence of the young girl's physical appearance, willingness to talk to strangers, and promiscuity. Historically, male writers frequently portray women as “helpless, if not passive” characters that “must be obedient and industrious” (Zipes 80). From Perrault's perspective, Little Red is an object of the wolf’s sexual desires and requires some form of societal control to prevent her from engaging in destructive, sinful behaviour. As a consequence, it is socially acceptable for the wolf to appear as a sexual subject, but improper for Little Red to be anything other than an object.

Often fairy tales, such as Perrault's “Little Red Riding Hood,” portray women as sexually untainted objects that must maintain their pure image. In blatant contrast, Carter's female
character “bursts out laughing” (Carter 151) when the wolf threatens her purity, as she knows she is “nobody's meat” (Carter 154). By creating a “witty and self-reliant image” (Wu 57) of a female, Carter allows her readers to ponder the association between fairy tales and female characterization. In particular, “The Company of the Wolves” heavily criticizes the stereotypical relationship between women and their social roles. By accomplishing this, Carter also draws attention to the fairy-tale “culture that fetishizes young girls as objects of sexual desire” (Lau 79). For instance, Carter quite obviously disregards the moral limitations Perrault puts forth by creating a sexually dominant and promiscuous female. The female protagonist is “an unbroken egg” (Carter 146) who is “afraid of nothing” (Carter 146). Carter does not allow the helpless heroine motif to constrain the abilities of Little Red. Instead, she makes it extremely clear that Little Red has complete control over her own sexuality (Wu 58). When the wolf treats Little Red like his next piece of meat, “she laugh[s] at him full in the face” (Carter 151). In an effort to create gender equilibrium between the two characters, Little Red “rips off his shirt for him and [flings] it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing” (Carter 151). In doing so, Carter's female character clearly speaks to the lack of sexual-agency classical female fairy-tale characters possess.

In attempting to accomplish this, Carter restores the sexual agency and spectatorship of Little Red. Through the use of “sight in combination with touch,” sexual power transfers from the wolf to Little Red, “signal[ing] an important moment for female spectatorship—a pleasurable moment in which women act as a distinct subject with agency and identity” (Lappas 116). At the beginning of the story it appears that Little Red is the object, as “[the wolf’s] eyes [are] fixed upon her” (Carter 149). Throughout the tale, Carter gradually integrates moments of promiscuity and sexual intrigue in relation to Little Red. For example, in response to the
wolf’s bet of a kiss Little Red “lower[s] her eyes and blushe[s]” (Carter 147). Carter explicitly states that Little Red “want[s] to dawdle on her way” to grandmother’s “to make sure the handsome gentlemen ...win[s] his wager” (147). In affirming Little Red's intentions, Carter is providing the readers with a glimpse at the female's sexual desires as a subject. Similarly, after undressing for the wolf at grandmother's home, she “[t]hen [goes] directly to the man with red eyes” (Carter 151) and assertively undresses him. At this moment, Little Red is aware of her own sexual power over the wolf and uses this strength to her advantage. Acting upon this knowledge, not only does she save herself from “provid[ing] dinner for the wolf” (Perrault), but she also fulfills her own sexual desires. In relation to Perrault’s cautionary morals, this combination of female independence, subjectivity, and promiscuity cannot exist within the realm of women's proper societal roles. However, as Carter implicitly points out, these roles, both within fairy tales and society, are social constructions of patriarchal ideologies (Wu 56).

Contrary to what our social values may support, females can desire and initiate sexual relations. Keeping this concept in mind, Carter describes a pure, sexually developing female who possesses a “full sexual consciousness-both innocent and knowing” (Wu 60). While the wolf may induce the erotic intrigue of the female, it is Little Red who acts upon it. This transition is particularly important as it marks the female's transformation from object to subject. The wolf charismatically asks for “[a] kiss” (Carter 147). However, she performs the erotic actions of “unbuttoning the collar of [the wolf's] shirt” and “freely [gives] the kiss she owe[s] him” (Carter 151). In recognizing her own sexual strength, the female protagonist “cease[s] to be afraid” (Carter 150) and “rips off [the wolf's] shirt...flinging it into the fire” (Carter 151). She is
no longer the item of sexual desire; instead the wolf becomes “the object of the gaze” (Lau 86). This crucial moment signifies the creation of a female who is the governing sex and a rebalancing of power relations between genders within a heterosexual relationship. This erotic and flirtatious connection between these two characters is all in an effort to “[dismantle] a world of sexual dualism” (Wu 60) and “sexual absolutes” (Lau 86).

While Perrault argues that “gentle wolves ...are the most dangerous one of all” and young women, such as Little Red, must not fall prey to them, Carter illustrates an opposing relationship between Little Red and the wolf. Instead of fearing the wolf, the young lady sympathizes with his unfortunate reality. When Little Red and the wolf first encounter each other in the woods “they [are] laughing and joking like old friends” (Carter 146), even though “she [knows] the worst wolves are hairy on the inside” (Carter 150). Outside grandma's house Little Red sees the wolf’s brothers: “so many wolves she could not count them, howling in concert as if demented or deranged” (Carter 150). Instead of becoming fearful, Little Red empathizes with the brothers by acknowledging that “[i]t is very cold, poor things ...no wonder they howl so” (Carter 150). This “wise child never flinch[es]” (Carter 151). Rather to the wolf’s surprise, she engages in sexual relations with him, as very few humans will willingly do. The wolf and Little Red demonstrate a unique and powerful relationship that highlights the importance of both acceptance for each other and acceptance for one's self:

She will lay his fearful head on her lap and she will pick out the lice from his pelt and perhaps she will put the lice into her mouth and eat them, as he will bid her, as she would do in a savage marriage ceremony. (Carter 151)

The act of picking the lice from his pelt and eating them signifies the compassion and acceptance Little Red has for the wolf. One may even suggest she is accepting of his and her own
wolfishness, as she herself appears more animal than human. She indulges in this moment, indicating the start of their “savage marriage” (Carter 151). “Sleep[ing] in granny's bed between the paws of the tender wolf” (Carter 152), Little Red now joins the wolves in their company. Perhaps not all gentle wolves are terrible companions for young, beautiful women.

In comparing Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood” and Carter's “The Company of Wolves,” there appears to be a great deal of contrasting perspectives in relation to Little Red. Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood” represents a moralistic telling of the classical fairy tale that seeks to impose control over female characters and their promiscuity. On the other hand, Carter takes Perrault's advice and completely disregards it in an effort to liberate Little Red from the constraint of the stereotypical female role, in which she is a helpless and innocent heroine. In doing so, Carter draws attention to the larger socio-cultural issue of female characterization within literature. Historically, while there are various versions of well-known fairy tales, as a society we tend to popularize those stories that enforce conventional social roles that depict women as innocent, domestic caretakers. Carter acknowledges and criticizes this fairy-tale motif by creating a unique and powerful leading role through the use of sexuality, feminine dominance, and sympathy for the wolf. Instead of simply becoming the meal that many examples of this fairy tale put forth, Little Red joins the wolves in their company and accepts her own wolfishness. Through transforming her fear of death into her greatest source of survival, the protagonist defies all boundaries of female fairy-tale characters. Carter's “The Company of Wolves,” in stark contrast to Perrault's “Little Red Riding Hood,” illustrates that not all women are incapable of saving themselves and unknowing of their own sexual and animal tendencies.
Works Cited


