

Postgraduate English

www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

Issue 29

September 2014

Editors

Yuexi Liu and Hazel Monforton

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: Transgressive Sexualities in 'Little Red Riding Hood' and Angela Carter

Jennifer Reid

Birkbeck, University of London

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: Transgressive Sexualities in 'Little Red Riding Hood' and Angela Carter

Jennifer Reid

Birkbeck, University of London

Postgraduate English, Issue 29, September 2014

In a famous article of 1983 entitled 'Notes from the Front Line', Angela Carter wrote:

I try, when I write fiction, [...] to present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions. [...] [M]ost intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode.¹

She went on to connect the process of 'putting new wine in old bottles' to the fairy tale, explaining that she found it useful 'to deal with the shifting structures of reality and sexuality by using sets of shifting structures derived from orally transmitted traditional tales'.² In other words, part of Carter's explicitly feminist and political technique in her fictional writing is that she does not just re-tell extant stories: she keeps re-telling what she has told, replicating in narrative form the tendencies of oral transmission, through which stories shift according to the location and demands of both teller and audience.

Of all her fairytale retellings, her versions of 'Little Red Riding Hood' are perhaps the most controversial. Thus in one of the most well-known critiques of *The Bloody Chamber*,

¹ *Shaking a Leg* 37

² *Ibid.* 38

Angela Carter's collection of retold fairy tales, Patricia Duncker famously interprets one of the short stories, 'The Company of Wolves', as a parable of rape and masochism:

Red Riding Hood sees that rape is inevitable [...] and decides to strip off, lie back and enjoy it. She wants it really. They all do.³

However, far from falling into the 'infernal trap' of the fairy tale as Duncker contends,⁴ I would argue that Carter uses the rich and often contradictory associations attached to the wolf in Western culture to achieve what Lorna Sage calls the 'proliferation, rather than the death, of the author'.⁵ Rather than retreating from her texts, she foregrounds both reading and writing as interpretation and critique. In her three 'wolf' tales of *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) ('The Werewolf', 'The Company of Wolves', and 'Wolf-Alice') and her related story in *Black Venus* (1985), entitled 'Peter and the Wolf', Carter's (self-)revision allows her 'to present a number of propositions' which she then further adapts and reconsiders in the homonymous radio and film adaptations of 'The Company of Wolves' (1980 and 1984, respectively).

Carter's interest in contemporary cultural theory, evident from much of her journalism as well as from her fiction, is closely related to her exploration of the fairy tale's potential either to police, or to liberate, sexual discourses. This article will therefore explore the metaphorical resonances of the wolf in European tradition and the critical traditions surrounding the fairy tale, in itself a proliferation of discourses upon which Carter draws, before going on to investigate her versions of 'Little Red Riding Hood' in terms of other contemporary debates which shed light on, and are reflected in, Carter's writing. I thus chart Carter's depiction of power and generational conflict in the tale, making reference to Michel

³ Duncker 7

⁴ Duncker 6

⁵ Sage 58

Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, published in English in the United Kingdom in the same year as *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). I then examine how Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror*, translated into English in 1982, can shed light on Carter's concern with the division between humanity and bestiality. By so doing, I wish to demonstrate that far from being straitjacketed by the fairy tale's gender politics, Carter challenges and subverts the 'deeply, rigidly sexist psychology of the [fairytale] erotic'.⁶ By drawing on and participating in contemporary discourses about power, sexuality, and construction of the self, Carter uses the multivocal and intertextual tradition of 'Little Red Riding Hood' to 'present a number of propositions' regarding storytelling, female sexuality, and gender construction, at the same time as she depicts the fluid and multivocal nature of the fairy tale itself.

'The Little Red Riding Hood syndrome'⁷

'Little Red Riding Hood' is one of the best-known, and most studied and commented upon, fairy tales in the Western canon and yet, paradoxically, the most changeable and adaptable tale, with several significantly differing versions and a wide variety of interpretations among folklore scholars.⁸ A well-documented oral French tradition contains several versions of a story featuring a little girl and a wolf, although the famous red cloak is conspicuously absent from the folktales. In this tradition, as in several analogous Italian and Asian variants, the (were)wolf tricks the little girl into unwittingly eating her grandmother's flesh and drinking her blood, before inviting her to strip off her clothing and join him in bed. In one key variant, the little girl is able to escape the wolf using her own cunning: claiming that she needs to answer a call of nature, she gives the wolf the slip and runs safely home. The tale is therefore notorious for its indeterminate ending: oral variants are divided between this empowering

⁶ Duncker 6

⁷ Zipes 56

⁸ Cf. e.g. Beckett; Dundes; Orenstein; Zipes

happy ending on the one hand, and on the other hand an unhappy ending which concludes with both grandmother and little girl being eaten. In the first written version, penned in French by Charles Perrault in 1697, the wolf successfully devours Red Riding Hood, and the tale ends with a suggestive verse moral about the dangers of sexual naivety, rendered by Angela Carter in her translation of Perrault as follows:

there are real wolves, with hairy pelts and enormous teeth; but also wolves who seem perfectly charming, sweet-natured and obliging, who pursue young girls in the street and pay them the most flattering attentions.

Unfortunately, these smooth-tongued, smooth-pelted wolves are the most dangerous beasts of all.⁹

The brothers Grimm, in their version, introduced a heroic huntsman to cut the women free, and then, borrowing the ending of ‘The Wolf and the Seven Kids’, had them fill the unfortunate wolf’s stomach full of stones. By so doing, they imposed a punishment on the villain, but removed from the heroine any triumph of resourcefulness; they then later appended a second, additional ending, in which Little Redcap meets another wolf and this time, now wise to the nature of wolves, tricks it into drowning with the help of her grandmother. No wonder, then, that many adults find it difficult to remember how this particular tale ends,¹⁰ or that Carter found ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ particularly useful for challenging her readers’ expectations of how fairy tales should progress.

Whichever the version, however, the cautionary function of the tale is evident, although this, too, has been widely and variously interpreted: as a literal warning against the presence in rural French life of wolves; as a coded admonition against sexual predators; as a

⁹ *Fairy Tales* 3

¹⁰ Cf. Adams 5

bourgeois lecture about social obedience and proper gender roles; or as an Oedipal exploration of immature, unformed female desire.¹¹ Throughout the history of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, however, there is a constant emphasis on transgression, either emphasised through the beastly male, the wolf, or alternatively through the eponymous heroine herself. Arguably, the older, oral variants of the tale were more concerned with the dangerous wolf than with the little girl’s disobedience: ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ exists within a broad inter-generic family of werewolf beliefs and texts, including, amongst numerous others, medieval accounts of werewolf trials. Jack Zipes claims ‘that wherever oral versions of the *Little Red Riding Hood* tale were found in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they were primarily discovered in those regions where werewolf trials were most common in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries’.¹² Significantly, many of those accused of being werewolves confessed that they targeted children: however reliable or otherwise such confessions can be deemed to be, the apparent association between predatory masculinity, wolfishness, and childhood vulnerability is significant for our understanding of the tale.¹³ We might also consider that the French phrase ‘elle a vu le loup’ (literally ‘she has seen the wolf’) means ‘she has lost her virginity’: it seems reasonable to suggest that the various traditions and sayings surrounding the wolf in Western culture mutually influence and are influenced by the fairy tale.

If the tale began as a dire warning against the dangers of wolves both animal and human, its emphasis since Perrault has shifted to an admonition against childish disobedience and female transgression. Bruno Bettelheim, in his influential psychoanalytic interpretation, sees the tale as embodying the oedipal conflict caused by inappropriate sexual feelings in the pubescent girl. Tellingly, he works from the Grimms’ version rather than Perrault’s, rejecting the latter because ‘in response to [...] direct and obvious seduction, [Perrault’s] Little Red

¹¹ Cf. e.g. Darnton, Zipes, Bettelheim respectively

¹² Zipes 4

¹³ Otten 64-7, 70-1, 77

Riding Hood makes no move to escape or fight back'. She is thus either 'stupid or she wants to be seduced', making her 'nothing but a fallen woman'. Despite his evident distaste for Perrault's explicitly sexual moral, Bettelheim himself interprets the story as a depiction of 'oedipal attachments linger[ing] on in the unconscious' of the 'school-age girl', thus 'expos[ing] [her] dangerously to the possibility of seduction'. The story therefore explores childish anxieties about sexual relationships on a number of levels: firstly, in terms of the conflict between ego and id which the huntsman and the wolf represent, and secondly, through the little girl's desire for the wolf (her father), which causes her to allow the attack on her grandmother, due to her oedipal sense of rivalry with the mother figure. In other words, 'Little Red Cap's danger is her budding sexuality, for which she is not yet emotionally mature enough'. She must reject her oedipal attraction, and accept both her own unreadiness for sexual relationships, and her reliance upon her father as a protective figure.¹⁴ As I will demonstrate below, Carter was both intrigued and angered by this particular interpretation of the tale, which figures female sexuality as inherently transgressive, necessitating containment and control. Particularly relevant here, however, is the evidence Bettelheim's account provides that by the twentieth century, the wolf is no longer seen as the focus of the tale: rather, interpretations of the story revolve around the little girl's vulnerability, on the one hand, and her disobedience and (sexual) curiosity, on the other.

Red Riding Hood and the 'Pedagogisation of Children's Sex': 'The Werewolf' and 'The Company of Wolves'

Jack Zipes argues that 'Little Red Riding Hood' has undergone a process of sanitisation over the centuries, through which it has been transformed into a bourgeois parable of appropriate sexual behaviours. Interestingly, he then explicitly connects the fairy tale with Foucault's

¹⁴ Bettelheim 169-73

The History of Sexuality, stating that ‘Foucault has referred to the process Red Riding Hood undergoes as a “pedagogisation of children’s sex,” which had become typical among the middle classes in the 19th century’.¹⁵ Foucault’s depiction of the process by which, since the eighteenth century, sexuality has been shaped into a particularly intensified site of the struggle between social powers and individual sexuality and identity is particularly useful for an examination of Carter’s deployment of the fairy tale.

Rather ironically, given Zipes’ citation of Foucault in support of his own hypothesis of bourgeois repression, Foucault rejects the ‘repressive hypothesis’ that, since the eighteenth century, individual sexualities have been silenced or marginalised in the interests of maximising economic production. Rather, he suggests, a proliferation of discourses regarding sex has taken place over the last two centuries, because increased regulation and concern for defining ‘appropriate’ sexual relations has made the topic central to Western thought and to our understanding of the self. In itself, therefore, sexuality does not exist, but is a construct. Far from being external or universal truths, our concepts of sexuality represent particular ways of thinking about the complex relationships between power, individuals, and institutions. Since every interaction involves a power imbalance, the relationship between power and sexuality need not necessarily be repressive: nevertheless, the strategies through which institutionalised power influences our knowledge of sexuality are paradoxically necessary to the continuation of that power, since if they do not define licit and illicit activities, and prohibit the latter, they are offered no opportunity to police the boundaries which they impose.

Foucault identifies four strategies by which women’s bodies, children’s sexuality, the procreative function, and supposed perversities have been defined and contained since the eighteenth century. The second of these, the ‘pedagogisation of children’s sex’, he defines as

¹⁵ Zipes 16

‘a double assertion that practically all children indulge or are prone to indulge in sexual activity; and that [...] this sexual activity posed physical and moral, individual and collective dangers’.¹⁶ While I suspect that Zipes subscribes rather more to the ‘repressive hypothesis’ than his untroubled citation of Foucault would suggest, there are several key points here in relation to Carter which seem to me to be pertinent and illuminating. We cannot help but understand sexual relations through the prism of the controlling strategies in place in our society, but these in turn shape what is considered desirable; the illicit takes on its own allure. Moreover, the idea that increased institutional concern regarding sexuality has led to the proliferation, rather than the silencing, of discussion, suggests the complex relationship between our socially contingent understanding of sexuality and the light which this sheds upon those controlling institutions in turn. It is worth noting, here, that Foucault resists an understanding of power, or institution, which is merely based on legal, religious or monarchical authority; as I have suggested, every social interaction contains a power dynamic of some kind. Relevant here is that the repressive forces which Zipes has identified in the literary development of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ in fact *ensure*, rather than forbid, that the tale and its palimpsests are read in sexual terms, and Carter exploits her reader’s implicit associations in order to illustrate the power-relations which pervade oral storytelling as much as any other social interaction.

At the same time as the demonisation of childhood sexual awareness which, according to Foucault, began to develop in the eighteenth century, the literary fairy tale was also emerging. As I have suggested above, like many literary fairy tales, ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ has come to embody a certain discourse, not only on gender and sexuality, but also on adult prohibition and childish disobedience: Jack Zipes and Cristina Bacchilega have both explored the ways in which Perrault and the Grimms successively edited the tale in order to

¹⁶ Foucault 104

sharpen these aspects in the popular nursery story that is best known today.¹⁷ Furthermore, the conflict which Foucault identifies as central to social constructions of sexuality is depicted in ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ in specifically generational terms, in both the literary and oral variants. While the former demonstrates the child disobeying the parental interdiction, in the latter the young girl unwittingly consumes her grandmother’s flesh and blood, and this has been widely interpreted as a symbolic ritual by which the young girl takes the grandmother’s place in society. Carter directly engages with this aspect of the story in her re-tellings, in which the little girl and the grandmother have a far more ambivalent relationship than in the Grimm’s nursery story. In an interview with John Haffenden, Carter claimed that ‘some of the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* are the result of quarrelling furiously with Bettelheim’.¹⁸ Such ‘quarrelling’ certainly seems apparent in the notoriously sexualised ending to ‘The Company of Wolves’ with which Duncker takes such issue, in which Red Riding Hood ‘cease[s] to be afraid’ and gets into bed with ‘the tender wolf’.¹⁹ Carter’s Red Riding Hood is neither the willing masochistic victim of rape that Duncker suggests, nor the ‘stupid’ fallen woman that Bettelheim describes, but rather is portrayed as strong-minded and independent, aware of her own desires. Carter does portray the psychoanalytic interpretation of the tale, however, and its categorisation of ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ female desire: this perspective finds its mouthpiece in the figure of Granny, as I will demonstrate below.

The relations of power, and how they influence social constructions of sexuality, therefore echo throughout Carter’s wolf stories. As a number of critics have remarked, the short stories stage a conflict between Granny’s repressive, antagonistic view of sexual relations, and Little Red Riding Hood’s sexual liberation, and this is further emphasised in both the radio play and the film version of *The Company of Wolves*. The ritualistic aspects of

¹⁷ Bacchilega 56-58; Zipes 13

¹⁸ Haffenden 83

¹⁹ *Burning Your Boats* 219-20

the original folktale, in which the Grandmother is sacrificed and consumed by the young girl in a grisly ceremony of transition and continuity, find an ambiguous and sinister counterpart in 'The Werewolf', in which the girl attacks and maims a wolf which turns out to be her own grandmother, before the villagers stone the old lady to death for witchcraft. Carter fully exploits all the varied symbolism around lambs and wolves in Western culture: the girl wears, not a red cloak, but rather a 'scabby coat of sheepskin', leaving the reader wondering whether she is the lamb to the slaughter or, on the other hand, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Although there is no cannibalistic ritual in Carter's tale, the girl literally takes her grandmother's place, and the story ends matter-of-factly: 'Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered'.²⁰ Since this tale precedes 'The Company of Wolves', it establishes a sense of generational conflict which then lurks below the surface in the following story: the grandmother's 'old bones under the bed set up a terrible clattering' when the girl gets into bed with the wolf, 'but she did not pay them any heed': after all, she knows what Granny did not, that she is 'nobody's meat'.²¹

The sense that the grandmother and the young girl represent opposing arguments about female sexuality is heightened in the radio play and the film, both of which allow for the literal staging of their competitive exchange of stories. The multiple narrators of the radio play allow Red Riding Hood's own thoughts to intrude upon Granny's storytelling, contradicting the moral of the latter's stories: that men are dangerous predators, and that sexual relationships should therefore be avoided. One of the stories which Granny tells her is of a huntsman who traps a wolf and cuts off its paw: immediately the paw transforms into a hand, and the body of the wolf turns into the body of a dying man. The huntsman is evocative of the Grimm's version, so that the reader or listener begins the account assuming, with Granny, that the huntsman is the hero of the tale and the wolf is the villain, 'vermin'.

²⁰ *Burning Your Boats* 210-11

²¹ *Ibid.* 219

Red Riding Hood, however, who has already described herself as ‘some magic, in-between thing’, sympathises with ‘the poor wolf’: ‘But I would be sorry for the poor thing, whatever it was, man or beast or some benighted ‘twixt and ‘tween thing’. Granny pays this statement no heed; it is unclear whether she chooses to ignore it, or whether we are privy to Red Riding Hood’s private thoughts here. Even more significantly, midway through Granny’s story the Werewolf himself, voiced by Michael Williams, interrupts the narrative and approaches Red Riding Hood, whispering seductively: ‘Now my skin is the same kind of skin as your skin, little sister. There! My hand...won’t you take hold of my hand?’ She gasps, and then recounts an occasion when she found paw prints in the snow, ending the reminiscence in equally sensual tones: ‘I put my little foot into the print, to match it for size, and I felt all the warmth that lies under the snow swallow me up’.²² Far from fulfilling its desired effect of instilling fear, then, Red Riding Hood’s experience of Granny’s tale takes on undeniably sensual, even erotic undertones, preparing us for her rejection of any simple predator/prey dynamic when she meets the wolf. As I will demonstrate below, the division between humanity and bestiality which Granny perceives, and which Red Riding Hood rejects, is one which Carter is particularly concerned to dismantle in her wolf stories, and which she associates with the same Judeo-Christian patterns of thought that structure social and sexual relationships.

Role-playing and Abjection: Rejecting Hierarchical Binaries in the Wolf Tales

Like many fairy tales, ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ is structured around a set of familiar oppositions: human and animal, innocence and experience, obedience and disobedience, predator and victim. However, role-playing is also foregrounded, and although such dichotomies are present throughout the tale, they shift in meaning and focus, particularly in

²² *Curious Room* 65-67

the oral tale. Thus Red Riding Hood is both victim of the wolf, and a cannibal who consumes her own grandmother. On a more ambivalent level yet, the wolf, described as werewolf in several folk variants, is both speaking person and carnivorous animal. Furthermore, the bodily functions which pervade the earthier folktale ensure that the female protagonist is also presented in terms both human and animalistic.

The sense of role-playing, and the fluidity between categories in this tale, allows Carter to attack the Judeo-Christian distinction between human and animal which, she suggests, enacts the same powerful/powerless binary upon which Western gender and class politics are based. This separation of supposed polar opposites enables and encourages associations with other, related divisions, such as male and female, Reason and Passion, mind and body, or (in Julia Kristeva's terms) whole and abject. Indeed, I would argue that Carter deliberately confronts, and recuperates, the abject figure in her wolf stories: as such, Kristeva's theory of abjection can offer a useful way of thinking about Carter's werewolves. According to Kristeva, the abject encompasses those materials that we expel from ourselves, or resist incorporating into ourselves, in order to preserve our sense of self-unity and integrity. The concept of liminality is thus central to our notion of the abject: the abject is not the Other or the object against which we define ourselves, but rather is 'at the border of my condition as a living being', the 'in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' which 'disturbs identity, system, order'.²³ The figure of the werewolf is a particularly apt means to portray such abject liminality, for several reasons: firstly, his indeterminate status between human and animal, and secondly, due to the bodily violence which he undergoes in order to change from one to the other, and his dual status as both victim and predator. Discussing the werewolf husband episode in Angela Carter's and Neil Jordan's film of *The Company of Wolves*, Charlotte Crofts points out that the 'werewolf is at once victim and aggressor, painfully ripping off his

²³ Kristeva 3-4

own skin and giving birth to the animal within. The wife is at once masochistic viewer and sadistic voyeur'.²⁴ Similarly, Lorna Jowett suggests that the werewolves in the film present a 'combination of hypermasculinity with feminized abjection and vulnerability'.²⁵ Finally, as I have suggested above, the werewolf represents not only the abject individual, but also the abject expelled from the social body: as Kristeva comments, the abject 'confronts us [...] with those fragile states where man strays on the territory of *animal*'.²⁶ The traditional association in Christian discourse between women and animals implicitly casts the feminine as the abject, as does a certain heightened awareness of, and uneasiness with, female bodily (especially reproductive) functions. Indeed, Carter emphasises this aspect of Red Riding Hood's liminality, drawing attention to her 'scarlet shawl, the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses'.²⁷

Furthermore, from a Foucauldian perspective, the power struggles which underpin such distinctions (despite, for example, the Victorian claims that men and women are 'equal but opposite') ensure that these oppositions are in fact intrinsically hierarchical, as Carter makes clear in her discussion of beastliness and the symbolism which we accord to animals in a *New Society* article, 'Little Lamb, Get Lost' (1978). In this article, she rejects 'the "beast in man" thesis of innate human nastiness' which is, she states, all 'projection. Animals are perfectly indifferent to us'. She elaborates that 'it is one of the more insinuatingly baleful effects of Judeo-Christianity that we can't treat the beasts as, in any sense, equals, but persist in projecting on them either our own beastliness or our fantasies of innocence'. The hierarchical concept of creation contained within Christianity, she suggests, which views animals as the subjects of ruling humanity, encourages the ill treatment of those we perceive to be less powerful than ourselves, whom we see as both vulnerable, and threatening, since

²⁴ Crofts 119

²⁵ Jowett 38

²⁶ Kristeva 12-13; emphasis in the original

²⁷ *Burning Your Boats* 219

they remind us of our own subjection to those who are more powerful: ‘People treat the animals they have in their power according to their expectations of their treatment by people who have power over them. (As, indeed, men do their wives)’.²⁸ The same attitudes, then, are more covertly and subtly found in Christian constructions of femininity, which so often work to align the female with the childish, the bodily, and the beastly.

Re-writing Freud and the Fall: The Wolf-Child in ‘Peter and the Wolf’ and ‘Wolf-Alice’

Carter particularly associates ‘the arbitrary division between man and beast’ with wolves; I would suggest that this is due to the wolf’s emblematic moral function as a symbol of greed and rapaciousness and a warning for children, as I have discussed above. The wolf is a particularly potent signifier because wolves have recognisably human social constructions, and the wolf-child is therefore a useful challenge to the human/animal distinction which, Carter suggests, ‘obliterates the fact that man himself is only another animal with particularly complex social institutions’.²⁹ She elaborated on the dangers of this attitude even further in an interview in 1985:

I like animals and I’m interested in animals. I’m also interested in human beings’ projections upon animals of negative qualities, which very often the animals don’t have. Take wolves [...]. Wolves in the wild are really quite safe [...]. I’m interested in the division that Judo-Christianity [*sic*] has made between human nature and animal nature. [...] I think it’s one of the scars in our culture that we have too high an opinion of ourselves. We align ourselves with the angels instead of the higher primates.³⁰

²⁸ *Shaking a Leg* 306-8

²⁹ *Ibid.* 301

³⁰ *Marxism Today* 21-22

Both 'Wolf-Alice' and 'Peter and the Wolf' explore notions of humanity and bestiality by presenting the child reared amongst wolves. Through the figure of the wolf-child, Carter explores Freudian constructions of gender identity implicitly based on a hierarchical view of the sexes, in turn heavily influenced by the Christian tradition, and by the story of the Fall in particular. The tales present a celebration of the human as animal, rejecting the pernicious distinction between humans and animals as one based on both guilt, and the power structures which ensure that hierarchical thinking shapes our experiences of our own sexuality.

A number of critics have commented on the parallel discussions of psychoanalysis and of the Fall in these two short stories.³¹ 'Peter and the Wolf', in particular, is a lucid critique of the Freudian concept of sexual difference, whereby a young boy first glimpses female genitalia and is traumatised by his realisation of the female 'lack', which instils in him the fear that he, too, might be 'castrated'. When Peter catches a sight of his female cousin's genitals, which, far from constituting lack, are 'a view of a set of Chinese boxes of whorled flesh that seemed to open one upon another into herself, drawing him into an inner, secret place in which destination perpetually receded before him, his first, devastating, vertiginous intimation of infinity'. Struck by an unnameable fear, experiencing 'a sensation of falling',³² he is shocked into existential guilt of the kind experienced by Adam and Eve when they comprehended their own nakedness; it is, of course, no coincidence that his shame prompts him to become pious. On his way to join the seminary in the nearby town, seven years later, he catches a glimpse of her again, this time in the wild, surrounded by cubs, drinking from the river:

She could never have acknowledged that the reflection beneath her in the river was that of herself. She did not know she had a face; she had never known she

³¹ Cf. e.g. Jennings

³² *Burning Your Boats* 287

had a face and so her face itself was the mirror of a different kind of consciousness than ours is, just as her nakedness, without innocence or display, was that of our first parents, before the Fall. She was as hairy as Magdalen in the wilderness and yet her repentance was not within her comprehension. Language crumbled into dust under the weight of her speechlessness.³³

His glimpse of 'her marvellous and private grace' liberates him: 'For now he knew there was nothing to be afraid of'.³⁴ Peter's grandmother in the story had attempted to welcome the wolf-girl and acknowledge her as family, one of them despite her bestial nature; this is in direct contrast to Prokofiev's symphony, in which the grandfather teaches the boy the importance of vigilance against the wolf, of keeping the wolf from the door. Thus as Elaine Jordan comments, in Carter's story 'shock and guilt make the difference between female and male yawn wider than the difference between human and animal, initially'; but upon seeing his cousin again,

the boy is not acknowledged by the father, but himself acknowledges the mother. [...] His knowledge now can incorporate kinship with the woman and closeness to animal existence; he has no need for alienating structures to maintain barriers against the facts of life.³⁵

As it so often does, Carter's 'demythologising' works on several, interrelated levels, drawing attention to how Freud's theories of sexual difference, despite purportedly explaining the ahistorical unconscious mind, in fact relies on a Judeo-Christian association between shame and guilt, sexual difference, and Man's supremacy over the rest of creation, including women.

³³ *Ibid.* 290

³⁴ *Ibid.* 290-1

³⁵ Jordan 25

Carter had already explored many of the same ideas in 'Wolf-Alice', in which the feral child raised by wolves is returned to human society, but is quickly abandoned, because although she is capable of learning, she cannot understand the piety which the nuns attempt to instil in her. Wolf-Alice is therefore rejected by human society because of the fear that her bestial innocence, like that of Peter's cousin, evokes: 'The wolves had tended her because they knew she was an imperfect wolf; we secluded her in animal privacy out of fear of her imperfection because it showed us what we might have been' (224). As in 'Peter and the Wolf', her unawareness of the notion of a cohesive, unified self, and of the rules governing sexuality and social behaviours, is presented as the antithesis of the guilt and shame of the Fall. This guilt is, in itself, merely another facet of the social imperialism and repression which distinguishes so thoroughly between humans and animals; free of both shame and of any desire for power, Wolf-Alice offers a form of salvation which the 'congregation' of villagers are too fearful and superstitious to recognise.

If you could transport her, in her filth, rags and feral disorder, to the Eden of our first beginnings [...], then she might prove to be the wise child who leads them all and her silence and her howling a language as authentic as any language of nature. In a world of talking beasts and flowers, she would be the bud of flesh in the kind lion's mouth: but how can the bitten apple flesh out its scar again?³⁶

Further developing the Biblical intertext, this passage recalls Isaiah 11:6: 'The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them'. Significantly, in the film, the

³⁶ *Burning Your Boats* 223

village priest reads this very passage to his congregation: later, he re-appears in Rosaleen's story about a wolf-girl who ventures out from 'the world below' and is wounded: putting aside his initial fear that she is devilish, he comforts her and binds her wound. Her tears drip onto a white rose, turning it slowly red. The girl then returns to the world below: 'She was just a girl, after all,' Rosaleen explains, 'who had strayed from the path in the forest, and remembered what she'd found there'.³⁷ Interestingly, this scene in the film here departs from the screenplay, in which this final narrative of Rosaleen's is an unfilmed 'story about love between wolves' (whether from 'the world below' is not mentioned), in which the priest is led by a male wolf to his dying partner; they both transform back into humans, 'tramps, outcasts, the rejected ones', and the grieving old man tenderly kisses his dying wife. Rosaleen concludes 'So then the priest knew what any wise child could have told him, that there are no devils, except the ones we have invented'.³⁸ Whether the film could be said to echo this message remains unclear. Many critics were disappointed with that the film appeared to shy away from Carter's controversially sexual denouement.³⁹ the final scene returns to the dream-frame, showing wolves bursting through Rosaleen's window and the latter waking suddenly, screaming. Over the credits, a voiceover then delivers a verse moral similar to Perrault's, warning 'little girls' that 'sweetest tongue has sharpest tooth'. In light of Jordan's revised ending, the changing of Rosaleen's story earlier in the film and the omission of her more egalitarian moral at this point seems telling.

In contrast to Wolf-Alice, the Duke represents the utterly abject being, his sense of self so collapsed that he has 'ceased to cast an image in the mirror'. He is cast as an automaton following the dictates of his terrible appetites:

³⁷ *The Company of Wolves* DVD

³⁸ *Curious Room* 243

³⁹ Cf. e.g. Anwell

He lives in a gloomy mansion, all alone [...] [and] sleeps in an antlered bed of full black wrought iron until the moon, the governess of transformations and overseer of somnambulists, pokes an imperative finger through the narrow window [...]. His eyes see only appetite.⁴⁰

His appetites, which have ‘cast [him] in the role of the corpse-eater, the body-snatcher’,⁴¹ combine two of the ‘most elementary and most archaic form[s] of abjection’, according to Kristeva: ‘food loathing’ and the ‘corpse [...] death infecting life’.⁴² His finds are ‘juicy’, ‘cadavre provençal’, provoking a mixture of amusement and revulsion in the reader, ensuring that we ‘other’ the Duke as thoroughly as the villagers. We are made emphatically aware, however, that his behaviour is not wolfish: the wolves ‘know his transformation is their parody. Unkind to their prey, to their own they are tender; had the Duke been a wolf, they would have angrily expelled him from the pack, he would have had to lollop along miles behind them’.⁴³

Conclusion: Mother Goose Liberated

Ultimately, Wolf-Alice saves the Duke by reversing his abjection, licking his face ‘without hesitation, without disgust’,⁴⁴ rejecting his nightmarish and rabid version of orality. This breakdown of boundaries recurs throughout the wolf stories, and in particular is achieved through audio effects in the radio play. Despite the generational conflict discussed above, the breakdown of divisions between inner and outer in the radio play contrastingly works to emphasise the harmony of Red Riding Hood and the wolf, rather than the disharmony between Red Riding Hood and Granny (although it should also be noted that the Werewolf’s

⁴⁰ *Burning Your Boats* 222

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 223

⁴² Kristeva 2, 4

⁴³ *Burning Your Boats* 223

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 227

munching sounds make Granny's death both more sinister and more comical in the radio play than in the film). The noises of the forest (the wind and the wolves howling) slowly begin to intrude into the domestic sounds of Granny's storytelling (the clock ticking, the fire crackling, and Granny knitting) until, in the final scene, the Werewolf tells Red Riding Hood the story of a wolf-child much like Wolf-Alice and Peter's cousin, with both domestic and exterior sound effects mingling in the background.⁴⁵ Of all three versions of 'The Company of Wolves', the radio play most subtly balances the final scene's narrative of sexual liberation with the undercurrent of predation and potential sadomasochism: Red Riding Hood is depicted as the 'external mediator' who, according to the short story, is the only way the wolf can achieve 'grace'.⁴⁶ The radio Werewolf is undeniably sinister, humming the seduction song from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* as he muses on Red Riding Hood's tender age;⁴⁷ at first, the symbolic connotations of the wolf as sexual predator, which Carter describes in 'Little Lamb, Get Lost', seem confirmed:

We return [...] to the notion of the carnivorous animal as id. Look no further than the connotations of the word, 'wolf'. In the wild, wolves have impeccable domestic institutions. [...] They are certainly less sexually voracious than the rabbit, but if Red Riding Hood had found a bunny in granny's bed, all it would have meant was that it was Easter. Yet the word is virtually synonymous with 'id', and with a particularly bestial type of ravening lust.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Curious Room* 83

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 214

⁴⁷ *Curious Room* 75-76

⁴⁸ *Shaking a Leg* 307-8

Red Riding Hood, however, soon realises ‘I must not be afraid because fear is their meat’, and she takes control of the situation, taming the wolf: as she strips, he whimpers in pain (‘Do I *blaze*, sir? Am I too bright for you, sir?’), and she rejects his invocation of wolfish appetites: ‘Why, anybody would think you were scared of being a good wolf all the time [...] For to their own, the wolves are tender, are they not?’⁴⁹ Even when she sees his brothers, ‘perched’ on the branches of the tree outside, she feels sympathy, not fear. This recalls Freud’s essay on ‘The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales’ (1913), in which he discusses the famous case of the ‘Wolf Man’, who had terrible dreams of wolves sitting in a tree outside his window, recalling an illustration of the wolf in ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ which had scared him as a boy. Commenting on his patient’s fear of his own father, Freud suggests ‘If in my patient’s case the wolf was merely a first father-surrogate, the question arises whether the hidden content in the fairy tales of the wolf [...] of ‘Little Red Riding-Hood’ may not simply be infantile fear of the father’, once again drawing the connection between infant sexuality and fear and shame (the pedagogisation of children’s sex, in other words) in the context of this particular fairy tale. Just as Peter eventually does, however, Carter’s Red Riding Hood rejects the Christian and psychoanalytic view of gender difference, which relies on delineating female sexuality as abject and shameful. As Carter suggests in ‘Little Lamb, Get Lost’, both horror and this particular fairy tale share an emphasis on orality, ‘the sharp teeth of beasts’: however, as Marina Warner points out, orality implies storytelling as well as consumption.⁵⁰ Red Riding Hood refuses to see wolves as Other, and the stories which she and the Werewolf tell each other in Carter’s various versions are also part of Carter’s wider celebration of storytelling as liberating and demythologising.

Carter’s versions of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, then, ‘present a number of propositions’ in order to enact what Bacchilega calls ‘acts of fairy-tale archaeology [...] that reactivate lost

⁴⁹ *Curious Room* 82

⁵⁰ Warner 182

traditions [and] trace violently contradictory genealogies'.⁵¹ At the same time, by staging generational conflict through storytelling, and dismantling the distinction between human and animal, she allows for a liberatory and transgressive identification between Red Riding Hood and the wolf which challenge hierarchical views of gender, and engage with contemporary theories about identity and gender construction. Her stories celebrate storytelling as a narrative form which weaves together sources and ideas (it is no coincidence that throughout both the radio play and the film, Granny continues to knit the red shawl of the original tale, as she knits together stories for her granddaughter), and as a liberating method of refashioning old stories and making them work for our times.

⁵¹ Bacchilega 59

Works Cited

- Adams, Alice. 'The Three Bears and Little Red Riding Hood in the Coffin House'. *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favourite Fairy Tales*. Ed. Kate Bernheimer. New York: Anchor Books, 2003. 3-6.
- Anwell, Maggie. 'Lolita Meets the Werewolf: *The Company of Wolves*'. *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*. Eds Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment. London: The Women's Press, 1988. 76-85.
- Bacchilega, Cristina. *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997. Print.
- Beckett, Sandra L. *Recycling Red Riding Hood*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. London: Penguin, 1991. Print.
- Carter, Angela. *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. London: Vintage, 1996. Print.
- . *The Curious Room: Plays, Film Scripts and an Opera*. Ed. Mark Bell. London: Chatto and Windus, 1996. Print.
- . *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*. London: Penguin, 2008. Print.
- . *Shaking a Leg: Collected Writings*. Ed. Jenny Uglow. New York: Penguin, 1998. Print.
- Crofts, Charlotte. '*Anagrams of Desire*': *Angela Carter's Writing for Radio, Film and Television*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003. Print.
- Darnton, Robert. *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. New York: Basic, 1984. Print.
- Duncker, Patricia. 'Re-imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers'. *Literature and History* 10 (1984): 3-14. Print.
- Dundes, Alan, ed. *Little Red Riding Hood: A Casebook*. Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P, 1989. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Volume One*. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1979. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. 'The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales'. 1913. *E-books Library*. Web. 26 April 2014. < <http://www.ebooks-library.com/author.cfm/AuthorID/508>>
- Haffenden, John. *Novelists in Interview*. New York: Methuen, 1985. Print.
- Jennings, Hope. 'Genesis and Gender: The Word, the Flesh and the Fortunate Fall in 'Peter and the Wolf' and 'Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest''. *Angela Carter: New Critical Readings*. Eds. Sonya Andermahr and Lawrence Phillips. London: Continuum International, 2012. 163-74.

Jordan, Elaine. 'Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions.' *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Ed. Linda Anderson. London: Edward Arnold, 1990. 19-40.

Jowett, Lorna. 'Between the Paws of the Tender Wolf: Authorship, Adaptation and Audience'. *Angela Carter: New Critical Readings*. Eds. Sonya Andermahr and Lawrence Phillips. London: Continuum International, 2012. 32-42.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: AN Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Print.

'The Company of Angela Carter: An Interview.' *Marxism Today* January 1985: 20-22. *Amiel and Melburn Trust*. Web. 14 September 2014. < http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/mt/pdf/85_01_20.pdf>

Orenstein, Catherine. *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale*. New York: Basic, 2002. Print.

Otten, Charlotte F. ed. *A Lycanthropy Reader: Werewolves in Western Culture*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986. Print.

Sage, Lorna. *Angela Carter*. Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994. Print.

Warner, Marina. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*. London: Vintage, 1995. Print.

Zipes, Jack, ed. *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood: Versions of the Tale in Sociocultural Context*. London: Heinemann, 1983. Print.

Film

The Company of Wolves. Director Neil Jordan. Granada, 1984. DVD.