



All The Better To Bisociate You With, My Dear: Little Red Riding Hood

"Because this Mr. Karswell had evidently set out with the intention of frightening these poor village children out of their wits, and I do believe, if he had been allowed to go on, he would actually have done so. He began with some comparatively mild things. Red Riding Hood was one, and even then, Mr. Farrer said, the wolf was so dreadful that several of the smaller children had to be taken out: and he said Mr. Karswell began the story by producing a noise like a wolf howling in the distance, which was the most gruesome thing he had ever heard."
-- M.R. James, "Casting the Runes"

Once upon a time, there was a little story that everybody knew, because it had a bright red hood and a dark, dark forest. What was under that hood might have been a goddess, or a monster -- and the same thing was true of the dark, dark forest. But deep in that forest lay Grandmother's house, full of good things for children like lycanthropy, cannibalism, and alchemy. So let's follow the story into the woods, then, and pick some bright, disturbing flowers for Grandmother.

"Once upon a time there was a sweet little maiden. Whoever laid eyes upon her could not help but love her. But it was her grandmother who loved her most. She could never give the child enough. One time, she made her a present, a small red velvet cap, and since it was so becoming, the girl always wanted to wear only this. So she was called Little Red Cap."
-- Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Little Red Cap" (1816)

The most familiar version of "Little Red Riding Hood" comes to us from the indefatigable Brothers Grimm: little girl in red on her way to grandma's house, warned against straying from the path, meets a wolf, strays anyway, wolf eats grandma and dresses in her clothes, plays riddle game with the little girl, eats her in turn, is fortuitously killed by a woodsman, little girl and grandma emerge unscathed. The Grimms got their version from a woman of Huguenot descent named Marie Hassenpflug in around 1811. She, in turn, likely read the earlier version set down by Charles Perrault in 1697, in which the girl is not warned against straying, and is equally unfairly eaten up at the end with no rescue.

Perrault's version is, in turn, a literary reconstruction of an older folktale, about which controversy continues to rage. Folklorists divide the honors for "original version" between the "happy ending" (in which the girl fools the wolf into letting her leave the house to urinate and escapes) and the "unhappy ending" (in which, as in Perrault, the girl is eaten up). Marxist folklorist Jack Zipes, in *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, plumps solidly for the happy ending, seeing the story as a female empowerment story of initiation into adulthood originating among the seamstresses of the upper Loire Valley in the late Middle Ages. The cultural historian Robert Darnton, in *The Great Cat Massacre*, holds out for the unhappy ending, seeing it as expressive of the fatalism and rawness of French peasant life. In both versions, however, the girl answers a first riddle from the wolf (concerning which path to take), eats grandma herself, and burns all her clothing before getting into bed with the wolf. Labyrinths, cannibalism, and bestiality: there's

obviously something more in Red Riding Hood's basket.

*"And oh, how happy any child would be
Who could put on a fine red cap, like me!"*

-- Ludwig Tieck, *The Life and Death of Little Red Cap* (1800)

To begin with, the Illuminati are hiding in there. Little Red Riding Hood doesn't become "Little Red Cap" in the Grimm version by accident; the "red cap" is the symbol of the Jacobin revolutionaries in France, and of the other Illuminated revolutionary movements across the Grimms' German principalities. The euphoniously-named Hans-Wolf Jaeger has argued that the Grimm version is an explicit political tale of foolish German revolutionaries swallowed up by the revolution they courted, and the woodsman, or hunter, becomes the pure spirit of the German people -- and, of the German police (also called "hunters"). Jaeger finds many references to the French occupiers as "wolves" in the literature of the contemporaneous Rhineland, and evidences Tieck's 1800 play *The Life and Death of Little Red Cap* with its staunchly feminist Red Cap and her lengthy soliloquies to the color red, which leaves the hunter's green "as far behind it as kings the crowd." Red is also the color of the French *oriflamme* battle flag, and of the Rosicrucians, while we're totting up secret histories.

*"And if this occurs it is not so strange
When the wolf should eat them.
I say the wolf, for all wolves
Are not of the same kind."*

-- from the moral to "Little Red Riding Hood," by Charles Perrault (1697)

But the wolf is less clear; as Perrault says, "all wolves are not of the same kind." In fact, the resistance against the French (Red Cap) invasion was led by wolves, the [Wehrwolves](#) of the Landssturm. And in fact, as we begin to look at the Big Bad Wolf more closely, we notice a disturbing tendency to transform -- from wolf to grandma and back -- and to disguise his true nature sufficiently that Little Red Riding Hood will banter with him in the woods rather than fleeing in terror. Perhaps our Big Bad Wolf is a Big Bad Werewolf, instead. In fact, in one of the oral versions recorded in the Nivernais in 1885, the wolf is explicitly referred to as a *bzou*, cognate with *garou*, both of which mean "werewolf" or "witch" rather than wolf (*loup*) per se. Indeed, the central body of Little Red Riding Hood stories comes from exactly the same area (the upper Loire, the Alps, and the Tyrol) as the great werewolf trials of the late 16th century. In this context, it's interesting to note that one infallible sign of werewolvary was red hair -- a red cap of hair, say. In Scots legend, the skinchanging selkies wore red caps, as did cannibalistic faeries who dipped their hats in the blood of their victims. Could Red herself be such an ogress, a werewolf, especially given her later emergence, like the medieval werewolf, from a wolf's skin?

"Take thou ten ounces of the red Sun, that is to so say, very fine, clean and purified nine or ten times by means of the voracious wolf alone: two ounces of the royal Saturnia; melt this in a crucible, and when it is melted, cast into it the ten ounces of fine gold; melt these two together, and stir them with a lighted charcoal. Then will thy gold be a little opened."

-- apocryphal "Testament of Nicolas Flamel" (1806)

And while we're on the subject of occult transformations, it's interesting to note that one school of alchemy -- also popular in France during the werewolf trials -- calls for the "grey wolf" to devour "the red Sun" or to "burn the Red King to ashes." Does this explain the burning of Red Riding Hood's cloak in the fire? Antimony, which readily alloyed itself with other metals, was the "devouring wolf," and the result of the devouring was that the philosopher's stone in the gold (the red Sun) overcomes the wolf and the (golden) "Body [is] rendered fit for the first stage" of the Work. In France, of course, the King was the Capet -- the Red Capet, alchemically? Could the burning of Red Riding Hood's cape, and her devouring by the Grey Wolf, somehow signal the opening of the monarchy for the Perfected Work of Louis XIV, the (Golden) Sun King? A king who, incidentally, sponsored Perrault's revision of the story; concealing the symbols while Making

Manifest That Which Should Be Hidden. Is Louis' apocryphal twin a werewolf, from the ancient Arcadian lineage, concealed behind an alchemically-inert [Iron Mask](#)?

"Tonight is the full moon, and the anniversary of that night, years ago, when I made my pact with the wolf goddess of the north."

-- Tanith Lee, "Wolfland"

Or is there a different hidden tradition in Jack Zipes' tale of female empowerment, one in which the original victim at Grandmother's House in the Woods was perhaps, the [Green Hunter](#), the King of the Wood? The Old Woman in the Wood has her own cannibal history, after all, from Baba Yaga to Hansel and Gretel. Is Red Riding Hood, like her Grandmother, a witch? In the Nivernais oral version, the wolf takes the "path of pins" to Grandmother's House (the pins symbolizing the witchfinder's tools pointing the way), and Red Riding Hood even has a cat familiar who tells her of the meal of flesh! In British and Irish folk tradition, witches wore red woven caps or hoods, as did other "outsiders" (such as Jews and witches) in continental France and Germany. Perhaps the story is one of Maiden and Crone, the red cape being the menstrual passage to Womanhood between the two? (And let's hear no reductionist guff about the red hood being a literary invention of Perrault; we're all having too much fun here for such tedia.)

The red cape might also be the moon of the lunar eclipse, reddened, in Slavic myth, by the moon's blood shed when her wolves (the wolves of Diana and Hecate) devoured and darkened her. Or the red cap might symbolize the red cap of the amanita muscaria mushroom, consumed in shamanic initiation rituals -- in which the shaman is burned in a fire, chopped up, devoured, and reborn whole. In that connection, of course, we remember that the [mandrake's](#) effects include hallucinatory shapeshifting -- perhaps our story centers on a hidden rivalry between the mandrake and the mushroom. Imagine two hallucinogenic shamanic traditions battling it out down the ages from the dark woods once upon a time, to the drawing rooms of Louis XIV's France, to the Illuminated battlefields of the Grimm Brothers' Germany. Could this be another echo of the war between the [Benandanti](#) werewolves and the Malandanti witches, fighting a secret war in the fairy tale dreams of children everywhere? My, what a big conspiracy you have, Grandmother . . .

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