Patching the Havoc:

Fairy-tale Intertexts in "Little Red Riding Hood" and Sylvia Plath's "Stone Boy with Dolphin"

by Jane Stringham

Sylvia Plath was far from a damsel in distress. And yet, in recent decades, scholars have taken up the necessary work of rescuing her from the cliché of poète maudit. We see Heather Clark spring Plath from the context of confessional poetics in *Red Comet*, her expansive and award-winning 2020 biography; and 2007 brought us *Eye Rhymes*, an essay collection focused solely on Plath's visual art. But there's another untapped route to Plath's tower: her fantastical source material, classical fairy tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Bluebeard." Clark's and other scholars' gestures become richer, more dynamic and decidedly more magical when we add to them the voices of Little Red Riding Hood and Bluebeard's wife in Plath's stories and poems. So often, the work of feminist and queer literary scholarship recovers silenced voices, and reading Plath through fairy tales contributes to their work.

Adding Plath's voice to the constellation of feminist fairy-tale research expands the Western and Anglo-American tradition of retellings and places her in dialogue with minority writers concerned with the fairy tale genre, as well as with classical print tale writers who drew from the oral tradition. Plath's early poem "Bluebeard" sends back "the key to Bluebeard's study," and reading her short story "Stone Boy with Dolphin," a kernel chapter from the lost novel *Falcon Yard,* against Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm contributes new and otherwise inaccessible strategies for interpreting classical print versions of Red Riding Hood (Plath 305).[1] As the tale of a girl and her cape evolves from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, some aspects of the story persist while others do not. However, one thing that arguably remains is the redness of her garment.

Like Plath, Perrault and the Brothers Grimm reshaped source material to write their "little red" stories. French folklorist Paul Delarue suggests that "The Grandmother's Tale," an oral variant of the Red Riding Hood story, was Perrault's source for his 1697 "Le petit chaperon rouge." In Jack Zipes' translation of "The Grandmother's Tale," the werewolf asks the girl to remove her clothing items, specifying each, one by one, in a tale totaling no more than five hundred words. Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill liken this lengthy scene to a striptease, a bawdy exchange that Perrault, and later on, the Brothers Grimm condense, or expunge, from their versions, in *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*. Turner and Greenhill wrote:

> "[B]y the time 'Little Red Cap' had been worked over, by Charles Perrault at the end of the seventeenth century, then by the Grimms at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Red's bawdy striptease for the wolf masquerading as grandmother had disappeared" (2).

For Turner and Greenhill, the young girl's

sexuality and self-possession, qualities that help her to escape the predatory wolf, are "no mere incidental motif…[their] recurrence suggests that [they are] fundamental" to the story's genetics (77). While the young girl in "Grandmother's Tale" removes her items of clothing slowly, one by one, tosses them into the fire, and finally escapes the werewolf, Perrault's little red riding hood removes only her bonnet, and the Grimms' Rotkäppchen has no time to undress before the wolf devours both girl and garment. It is because this striptease is condensed in classical print versions, pared down in Perrault's and nonexistent in the Grimms,' that Turner and Greenhill claim this element "disappeared" completely in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, the classical period of tale-writing, until its reemergence in the late twentieth century. When read back through Plath's twentieth-century rewrite, however, Perrault's "stripping" and "teasing" language seems to come out of hiding. "Stone Boy with Dolphin" recovers and refashions this striptease scene through material textiles and illuminates the ways in which a linguistic tease persists in Perrault. Both readings hinge on red textiles, those creative and destructive agents with appetites of their own which do not, in fact, disappear.

Perrault's print tale makes use of language in a way the oral tale cannot. In writing, we see that the girl's tufted red bonnet which, "suited her so well that everyone called her the little red riding hood," is not capitalized, as a name would be (Jones 175). As Jones notes, Perrault's choice to leave "the little red riding hood" lowercased suggests it has eaten away at the young girl's name and eroded her identity, anthropomorphizing the hood and even endowing it with its own appetite (175). Jones explains how this lack of capitalization is unique to "Le petit chaperon rouge" when she writes: "[W]hile it is not uncommon for characters in French fairy tales to be called only by their title or salient feature…it is rare that a heroine should have a descriptor that is not capitalized" (175). We can think of Bluebeard, for example. And yet, as Perrault allows the hood to consume the young girl's identity, he also throws her a bone—a shard of will. Before climbing into bed with the wolf, the little red riding hood casts off her clothes. As she does, we could say that she willfully reclaims some sense of her identity, and even prioritizes her own appetite over the hood's. By letting the hood go hungry before she climbs into bed with the wolf, Perrault's heroine effectively shifts the hierarchy of appetite in the narrative, where wolf and textile's hunger have been previously privileged over her own. Jones' reading of an empowered little red riding hood resonates with Plath's reworked striptease scene, which all but disappeared between the periods of oral tradition—that "global sisterhood" of tales which includes the Chinese "Lon Po Po" and the Italian "False Grandmother"—and classical print tales, not to appear again until the late twentieth century (Orenstein 70).

Plath reworks the striptease scene in a more material way than Perrault. Her story's protagonist wears a red headband, a red belt, a red scarf, and red lipstick, while even the reddish rust of Dody's bicycle suggests the original garment's identity-eroding qualities, that is to say, its "appetite," has both multiplied and disintegrated: "[Dody] balanced her rust encrusted Raleigh and let Bamber scramble for the oranges" (Plath 173). Together with the image of Dody's "red plaid scarf," which is "whipping back in the wind," the bicycle's rust completes her character's image of disarray. Later, by contrast, Dody carefully puts herself together with red accessories—a belt, a band and lipstick.

To apologize for throwing Dody off her path, Bamber invites her to a party where "all the literary boys" will be and promises to send their mutual acquaintance Hamish along as her escort (174). Bamber interrupts Dody's bike ride with the promise of an amateur literary salon, paralleling the little red riding hood's detour in Perrault's tale, the time she spends "happily picking hazelnuts, running after butterflies, and making bouquets with tiny flowers she found" (Jones 175). The little red riding hood's pursuit of butterflies is transformative in Perrault; it teaches her something about fear. Where she previously "didn't know that it is dangerous to stop and listen to wolves," she arrives at her grandmother's house, "hear[s] the wolf's gruff voice and [is] at first afraid" (Jones 176). Plath's protagonist Dody pursues her desire in a similarly transformative and autodidactic way.

In preparation for Hamish's arrival, Dody dons

the binding red accessories. Plath lists each one, mirroring the repetition from the girl's de-robing scene in "Grandmother's Tale" to create a strip tease in reverse, a "dress tease."[2] Dody's props include the red headband, a "wide red belt" and red lipstick and, after dressing, she portends, "I will bear pain…painting her fingernails Applecart Red" (Plath 175). Plath's protagonist dresses to tease, to call attention, and to offer herself: "Unwincing, in her mind's eye, she bared her flesh. Here. Strike home" (175). Dody anticipates the moment when her clothes and accessories will be cast off and reveal her flesh. She reads pain into it, stoically "unwincing" and demands a "strike."

While fairy tale scholars might read Dody's dress tease as a continuation of Red Riding Hood's naivete, sexual curiosity and victimization, as Jessica McCort suggests in "Alice in Cambridge: Little Girls Lost and 'Stone Boy with Dolphin,'" Dody's monologue sets her apart in two ways. First, she understands how pain can accompany the pursuit of desire. Second, Dody is not eclipsed by one garment, as we see in Perrault. Rather, she retains her name and identity, commanding an army of red accessories and using their multiplicity to her advantage—as accessories for sating her appetite. She begs the "jewel pricks of the stars: let something happen. Something terrible, something bloody" (175). Like her red accessories, Dody's desire is multiple and even undefined, anchored only by "something" terrible and "something" bloody. Unlike Perrault's little red riding hood, Dody harnesses her accessories to expand her unfixed appetite. Turner and Greenhill's work encourages fairy tale scholars to read classical print tales "transgressively," "where the lens shifts focus from normative sexual dynamics…to the tale's internal struggles, suggestive of multiple and more complex desires," like Dody's (4). Dody's accessories do not consume her identity as the red hood threatens to do so in Perrault, but act as vessels which channel her desire toward what is bloody, what is terrible and, at this point in the text, what is unspeakable. Dody's first "wolf" in the story, her chaperone Hamish, directs her multiple and complex desire.

Hamish participates in Dody's dress tease when he holds her red coat flared and helps her with its sleeves (Plath 176). Like a good chaperone, he also carries her torn academic gown in a "black, funereal bundle" (176). Hamish's attention to Dody's clothing and her behavior stands out, especially in the absence of a mother or grandmother figure. By dressing Dody, he mirrors the grandmother as giver of Red Riding Hood's cape. By chiding and guiding her, he echoes the mother in the Grimms' "Rotkäppchen," where mother warns daughter not to stray from the path. just as Hamish. Specifically, he warns Dody to "keep away" from literary boys at the party (177). This characterization of Hamish mirrors other scholarly readings of the wolf's complex identities.

As Catherine Orenstein notes in *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked*: "[T]he wolf, our arch symbol of masculinity and even misogyny is also a transvestite, a mother-to-be, and even sometimes a grandmother," whose final scene in "Rotkäppchen," where a male hunter cuts out young girl and grandmother from his stomach, has been read as a "c-section" by Anne Sexton (95). Plath even calls Hamish's behavior toward Dody "guardian angelling," perhaps in reference to the "obedient angels in pink gauze" that decorate the walls of the party house, nearly dressing up Hamish himself in pink (182, 179). Dody's unvoiced answer to Hamish's motherly warning is "worth keeping from is worth going to" (177). Unlike the little red riding hood, Dody's dalliance in the woods is a conscious, lucid choice. Just as Hamish's behavior supports "transgressive" readings of classical fairy-tale roles, so does a female party-goer in her "sweater and skirt of *hunter's* green," and so too does Dody's predatory expression of desire. When Hamish scolds Dody for the tear in her gown, warning her that proctors would rip it to shreds if they noticed, Dody responds to Hamish's grandmotherly comment with: "'I'd sew it up,'…" and, to herself, says, "Men. Mend the torn, the tattered. Salvage the raveled sleeve" (179). Dody's language foreshadows her role as both salvager and predator. She is hungry for "what's worth keeping from," even if it harms her, and desires to recreate the sleeve of her gown. By the end of the story, Dody patches the tattered and incomplete models of passive female fairy-tale roles, but first, her appetite tears them right up.

Dody's appetite reads as wolf-like when she

hunts the poet Leonard in a predatory and crafty manner: "knitting up the sleeve of circumstance. She moved," she pounced (183). Leonard's shadowy moss-green chin matches his twill shirt, which pokes through the holes of his black sweater, and is "worn and torn," like Dody's black gown (180, 184). Dody's pickup line is one of Leonard's own from a poem he wrote: "patch the havoc," she says (183). He mimics her: "not all their ceremony can patch the havoc" (182). Dody lures Leonard with his own language, just as the wolf lures grandmother with Red Riding Hood's language, and lures the young girl with her grandmother's. Like the wolf, Dody is successful in satisfying her appetite, but only up to a point.

Plath suggests Red Riding Hood's interrelation of food, sex and dress when Leonard strips off Dody's red hairband, puts it in his pocket and then "rakes" Dody's mouth with "green shadow, moss shadow" (183). Leonard undresses Dody in a manner more sinister than Hamish, and then tries to flee quickly from the locus of their tryst—a small room where "people's coats slumped in piles on the tables, castoff sheaths and shells…ghosts gone gallivanting" (183). Just like Dody, bodies at the party seem incomplete without their protective shells. Headbandless and presumably freed from her other binding accessories, Dody makes one last attempt to satisfy her appetite:

> "sighting the whiteness of his cheek with its verdigris stain, moving by
> her mouth. Teeth gouged. And held. Salt, warm salt, laving the taste buds
> of her tongue. Teeth dug to meet… mark that, mark that" (184).

Dody, unsatisfied by her red accessories as markers of desire, steps far outside passive descriptors of the Grimm girls when she tries the wolf on for size, and bites into Leonard's cheek.[3] For a fleeting moment, Leonard becomes her eroticized meal and Dody disturbs fairy tale gender roles. Yet, when teeth leave flesh, Leonard quickly punishes Dody for her evershifting and malshifting sartorial desires. Traditional tale identities seem to clatter into place as Leonard pushes Dody away, leaves disgusted, and informs the party of her behavior. Dody leaves the house fearing, "Mothers would stop in Market Hill, pointing to their children: 'There's the girl who bit the boy. He died the day after'" (186).

McCort reads this moment of mastication as evidence of Red Riding Hood's inability to escape naivete, victimization, and punishable curiosity through time, and argues that Plath punishes Dody for stepping outside feminine fairytale etiquette. As she explains how Dody tries on the slippers of other leading ladies of fairy tales, McCort overlooks one key furry garment. She writes:

> "In 'Stone Boy,' Plath carefully and painstakingly collages popular fairy
> tale and fantasy imagery into an arrangement that places women's sexuality
> and the imaginative process of female fantasy, and more importantly,
> how such fantasies are formed, under scrutiny" (184).

McCort's attention to the "formation" of fantasies speaks directly to the rhetoric of Turner and Greenhill, who write: "[I]n a sense, the entire…project hinges on agreeing with the critical importance of understanding desire(s) *as*, and *in* formation" (11). That is to say, when reading tales transgressively, the object of desire is not necessarily singular but multiple, and always already in the process of formation—much like the recursive process of patching a garment. Dody attempts to access her unspeakable, multiple desire for "something terrible" and "something bloody" in the text by "trying on" like party dresses not only the role of Red Riding Hood, but also those of Rapunzel, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, and finally, the wolf himself.

McCort's argument, which reads the aftermath of Dody's meal as her "punishment," becomes richer when we consider Dody's constant state of becoming and the implications of her lost red mouth. After her bite of cheek, Dody leans into the mirror and notices that:

> "…there was no mouth on the face: the mouth place was the same sallow
> color as the rest of the skin, defining its shape as a badly botched piece of
> sculpture defines its shape, by shadows under the raised and swollen
> parts" (Plath 185).

By effacing Dody's lipstick-covered mouth, Plath compares it to Dody's other impermanent and red accessories. McCort, by contrast, writes that removal of mouth, voice and appetite are part of the irreversible punishment for the "totally naïve Little Red Riding Hood" (182). And yet, by nature of its removability, Dody's mouth joins the ranks of her crimson accouterments with multiple desires, calling for a more nuanced reading of the "punishment."

When mouth becomes a removable accessory, links emerge between body and clothing, a comparison which calls into question the "red cloak of doom's" substance and the "hunter green skirt's" fabric content—that is to say, their text(iles)—which have a form and a history. The etymology of textile is "a woven fabric," and when Dody begins to rely on woven stories after losing her mouth, she echoes Ovid's Philomela and his paradigmatic tale of text/textile interplay (OED). Tereus rapes Philomela, the sister of his wife Procne, and cuts Philomela's tongue from her mouth to prevent her from telling her story. Locked inside a cabin of stone, "her speechless lips could tell / No tale of what was done. But there's a fund / Of talent in distress, and misery / Learns cunning. On a clumsy native loom / She wove a clever fabric, working words / In red on a white ground to tell the tale / Of wickedness" (Ovid 130).

Stripped of mouth and tongue, Dody and Philomela find resources for speech elsewhere. Ovid emphasizes Philomela's cunning—and *red* thread—in the face of the resources' inadequacy. The color palette of Philomela's tapestry seems especially significant when read against Kate Bernheimer's notes on color usage in fairy tales. She writes:

> "Interestingly, if you look back at traditional fairy tales you will also find a very limited use of color and a heavy reliance on things that are metallic or glass. In many literary versions of 'Little Red Riding Hood,' you will find the color of her cloak described and the wolf's teeth often are white" (67).

Red color functions as the conjoining thread between Philomela and Dody, as the latter relies on the texts of fairy tales to access her identity and channel it outward through red accessories. Like Philomela, she goes on to weave a textile of self that is constantly in formation.

Reading textiles—red textiles—as texts and reading bodies as texts diversifies Plath's engagement with the classical fairy tale, and sheds light on her choice to outfit Dody in the genderbending role of the wolf. Through Dody's language and her consistent desire to mend what is torn and tattered, Plath suggests to readers a strategy for reading carefully, constructively and transgressively, almost as if she encourages them to take the path of needles, which sew and weave, rather than the path of pins, which temporarily join, from "Grandmother's Tale." Dody tells Hamish, for example, that she will "salvage the raveled sleeve" of her gown "with black embroidery thread. So it wouldn't show," a creative process more constructive and recursive than Hamish's warning about the robe being torn to shreds (179). Furthermore, the most tattered textiles in the story belong to Leonard and Dody, whose passionate encounter leaves an ambiguous, conceptual hole in Plath's text. As such, it opens itself up to reworking and reweaving.

McCort reads Leonard's response to Dody as her "punishment," Dody as "passive sexual victim," and Plath's story as a mode of scrutiny of female roles in fairy tales. McCort critiques how female fantasy, or desire, is shaped by the fairy tale when she writes:

> "Plath underscores the misguidedness…of the fact that [Dody] is turned on by a man who seems both brutal and sadistic, demonstrating that this desire has been learned at least partially in the imaginative worlds that the girl inhabits when reading" (180).

There are moments when Dody does read like a true Grimm girl—inert, passive, and "mostly dead" (Plath 180) during an unexciting sexual encounter with Hamish, for example—behavior which McCort calls Dody's "masochistic reliance on fiction" (McCort 180). There are other moments in Plath's story, however, which laud the transformative power of woven and spoken word. These fairytale fictions are not fully "formed," but weave themselves within and

throughout Dody's nebulous, shifting fantasies, "*in* formation" (McCort 184; Turner and Greenhill 11). That Dody shifts among many fairytale based signifiers, has no fixed essence, and tries on a role that problematizes binary gender renders optimistic Plath's speculation that the party crowd would "keep the story on the tongues, changing, switching its colors, like a chameleon over smeared and lurid territory" (Plath 186). Plath provides an example of these chameleonlike shifts when Leonard's poetic utterance, "not all their ceremony can patch the havoc," becomes shortened in Dody's mouth to the imperative "patch the havoc" (183). Seemingly, Dody anticipates her behavior becoming gossip fodder and provides her storytellers with a strategy by commanding them to patch its havoc. Later in Plath's text, Dody discovers a second community of storytellers.

When she arrives home after the party, Dody constructs female community, not from her housemates, but from her literary predecessors, as Plath wrote:

> "In her thirdfloor attic room she listened, catching the pitch of the last
> shrieks: listened: to witches on the rack, to Joan of Arc crackling at t
> he stake, to anonymous ladies flaring like torches in the rending metal
> of Riviera roadsters, to Zelda enlightened, burning behind the bars of
> her madness" (175).

These literary ladies cook just as the peasant girl's clothes burn in the fire of "Grandmother's Tale" and yet, they persist. Dody strips herself down alone in her dorm room, drinks a simple glass of milk and observes how it will mark her, just as the encounters with Leonard and Hamish have, "stained, deepgrained with all the words and acts of all the Dodys from birth cry on" (194). For Dody, gestures stain but speech has the same capacity to mark. By describing "the room brimming with her act, with versions and variations on the theme of her act which would mark her by tomorrow like the browned scar on her cheek," Dody displays her understanding that voicing out loud memories of performed gestures can make them liberatingly mutable (186). Gestures of stripping, cooking, and burning present Red Riding Hood and her twentieth-century iterations with opportunities to wreak and patch havoc in moments of becoming. Dody nods to Zelda and Joan of Arc as her literary predecessors, and it is about time Plath receives recognition for nodding to the peasant girl in "Grandmother's Tale" who is resourceful and brave, saves herself, and escapes the text free from any trappings of clothing.

With this argument in mind, performative utterances in "Le petit chaperon rouge" merit revisiting—especially in terms of the "tease." Like Perrault's shortened strip scene and the wolf's meal of girl flesh, the true tease in Perrault's tale revolves around appetite. Both little red riding hood and the wolf tease out appetite through language during their pillow talk scene, where little red riding hood verbally strips the wolf down, body part by body part. Each body part she mentions is met by an affirmation from the wolf that its "great" size is meant for figuratively consuming the girl: arms to hug, eyes to see, ears to hear her and finally, teeth to eat. Little variation occurs between the little red riding hood's sentences, suggesting that if she continues to name more body parts before arriving at "teeth," this tease would continue, and the wolf would simply have to wait for his meal. As such, juxtaposing Plath's short story with Perrault's tale reveals another act of volition from little red riding hood, who teases the wolf, not by stripping, but through language. It is as if by paring down "The Grandmother's Tale's" clothing-dependent striptease scene, Perrault highlights the linguistic variation of the tease. In this sense, Perrault does not ignore sexuality in his tale but plays with it through a properly narrative channel. That these playful moments occur verbally render them a process of becoming akin to Dody's, and prime them for use as future tools of tellers to trouble, mark, and then patch the havoc of the Plath myth.

[1] To differentiate between multiple versions of the tale, Perrault's French print version appears here as "Le petit chaperon rouge," the Grimm's print tale is "Rotkäppchen," and "Red Riding Hood" will refer to the tale type as a group, including classical print and early oral variants like "Grandmother's Tale."

[2] As Clark notes, the heroine in Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus,"

which "treated the confessional impulse ironically," also "performs a striptease for the 'peanut-crunching crowd' that has come to watch her bare all and attempt another suicide" (xxii).

[3] It is impossible not to read this scene as a fictionalization of Plath and Ted Hughes' first meeting. For Clark, "The sensational nature of their first meeting—Plath famously bit Hughes's cheek when he kissed her at a raucous party—has obscured the literary context that brought them together" (xxiii).

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