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All the Better to Eat You with: Sexuality, Violence, and Disgust in 'Little Red Riding Hood' Adaptations

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Abstract: In this paper I explore how fears of incorporation, sexual violence, permeability and 'leakiness' and metaphorical and literal villains are negotiated within the contemporary fairy tale retelling tradition. Through the close reading and comparative analysis of two twenty-first century Young Adult (YA) retellings of 'Little Red Riding Hood' from the 2010s (*Sisters Red* by Jackson Pearce and Elana K. Arnold's *Red Hood*), I argue that this representation and negotiation of sexual, violent, and gustatory appetites is made possible due to the intersection of the fairy tale, horror, and YA genres, creating a unique space in which the lycanthropic and human figures are sources of dread and intrigue and the terrifying and absurd. In doing so, I argue that this contemporary tradition continues the well-established narrative of the fairy tale as a site of simultaneous high dramatics and interrogation of the everyday.

Keywords: fairy tales; 'Little Red Riding Hood'; young adult fiction; sexual violence; monstrosity; grotesque

1. Introduction

Maria Tatar (1992, p. 3) argues that when the fairy tale genre '[took] up residency in the nursery, something was lost in the move'. Instances of violence, sexuality, incest, cannibalism, and murder were decreased (or removed) to suit the 'productive discipline' (Tatar 1992, p. xvi) of children's literature. However, the last several decades have seen a 'renaissance' of sorts of the fairy tale telling and retelling tradition beyond the nursery. Resisting, in part, the 'stranglehold' that Jack Zipes (1999, p. 333) argues the Disney Corporation has on the fairy tale tradition, the 2000s and 2010s saw a resurgence of these stories within both 'old' and 'new' media for an adult and child audience (Bacchilega 2013; Brugué and Llompart 2020; Schwabe 2016). These adaptations have included retellings of 'Little Red Riding Hood', a tale with an established history of cannibalism, sexual violence, bestiality, burlesque, and lycanthropy. It is clear within this resurgence that the tales once again explore the violence, sexuality, horror, incest, and cannibalism present in older variants. This influx of adaptations reveals not just the ongoing adaptability and 'malleability' (Brugué and Llompart 2020) of the genre as a means of cultural commentary and criticism but also reinforces the construction of the genre as a 'web' that stretches back, across, and ahead to other genres (Bacchilega 2013; Jones and Schacker 2012).

In this paper, I continue the ongoing literary and cultural interrogation of the fairy tale genre through analysis of two contemporary retellings of the 'Little Red Riding Hood' fairy tale, *Sisters Red* by Jackson Pearce (2010) and *Red Hood* by Elana K. Arnold (2020). The texts bracket the 2010s, a decade that saw changes to contemporary discourses surrounding adolescence and girlhood and, when compared, reveal the changes via representations of adolescent girls and girlhood, sexuality, female culpability, and narratives of disgust. Both texts draw on the history of the tale as a narrative of interrogation and critique regarding female responsibility for male violence. *Sisters Red* reproduces the ambivalence surrounding female sexuality, ultimately presenting the adolescent girl as required to monitor male

sexuality. *Red Hood*, conversely, dismantles the idea of female culpability for sexual violence, reflecting the changes in attitude that occurred across the 2010s. Both also utilise narratives of disgust to provide a unique space for the negotiation of contemporary social and cultural criticism. While *Red Hood* balances between disgust and intrigue, the grotesque and the empowered via representations of menstruation, *Sisters Red* presents narratives of abjection and the grotesque entirely through representations of the wolf character, allowing for interrogation of the blurring between the human and monster or Other. Ultimately, both texts draw on the tradition of the fairy tale as a means of interrogation, criticism, and reproduction, embodying the ongoing negotiation of gender and sexuality across the 2010s.

A Shapeshifting Corpus: 'Little Red Riding Hood', Genre and Context

To allow for the 'resituating [of] literature in the larger matrix of cultural and social processes' (Jay 2014, p. 118), a text must be considered within its cultural, social, and literary context. As Francisco Vaz da Silva (2016, p. 171) notes, 'stories about a girl in red who meets the wolf have an ancient pedigree', with 'ruddy encounters with wolves' (Vaz da Silva 2016, p. 172) persisting across several centuries. Furthermore, 'Little Red Riding Hood' is often identified as one of the most recognisable fairy tales, with the mere mention of a red hooded cloak and a young girl in the forest invoking the tale for many (Orenstein 2002). Like many fairy tales, however, it is difficult to identify a linear and chronological history, as well as an urtext or original text, due to their location in both the literary and oral traditions and the fluidity of the genre itself (Spahr and Santos 2015).

Cristina Bacchilega (2013, p. 443/6168) constructs and interrogates the fairy tale genre as a 'web', rather than a chronological arrangement, as it more clearly acknowledges the multiple ways in which a fairy tale can be told, the context in which it is adapted, and its location alongside (and in opposition to) its many variants. Bacchilega's (2013) conceptualisation of this 'web' allows for connection between genres, time periods, and cultures, refusing to silo any one tale to any one location. Jones and Schacker (2012, p. 37) similarly argue that the history of the fairy tale is one that is 'tangled' with interlocking tendrils and patterns that change in accordance with the 'vantage point from which one looks at them'. In analysing both *Sisters Red* and *Red Hood* with the acknowledgement that they are not only 'tangled' within the larger web of the fairy tale but also part of the ongoing collaboration between genre and its historical, social, and cultural contexts, I contribute to this ongoing construction of fairy tales, as not belonging to one specific group, time, or culture, but as malleable, moveable, and adaptable.

As a result, I consider the history of 'Little Red Riding Hood' as a web containing 'anchorpoints' of importance. These include the preliterary 'Grandmother's Tale' stories, Perrault's 1697 *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*, and the Grimm Brothers' *Rotkäppchen*, from 1812. Arguably, all variations of the tale draw from these early adaptations, whether that be via narrative, characterisation, or setting. Furthermore, the cultural context of both *Sisters Red* and *Red Hood* should also be seen as anchor points for this research, as it is integral to locate the texts within their 'larger matrix' (Jay 2014, p. 118). In doing so, I reaffirm the argument that popular literature and culture contribute to the creation of (as well as resistance to) contemporary understandings of gender, sexuality, and relationships.

As per Vaz da Silva, quoted above, tales featuring wolves and girls have a long history. *De Puella a Lupellis Seruata*, for example, Egbert of Liege's eleventh-century story about a young girl's encounter and rescue from a pack of wolf cubs, has been identified as, if not the 'ancestor' of the literary 'Little Red Riding Hood', then existing 'somewhere on the family tree' of the story (Ziolkowski cited in Vaz da Silva 2016, p. 171). Vaz da Silva (2016) also argues for the possibility that Charles Perrault's *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* was crafted, in part, out of oral variants of the tale that were well established at the time. The consistency of several folk motifs within the widespread oral variant does suggest 'deep roots' (Vaz da Silva 2016, p. 173) and longevity.

These oral variations are often referred to as 'The Story of Grandmother' or 'The Grandmother's Tale' (Orenstein 2002; Spahr and Santos 2015; Zipes 1993). These variants

feature scenes of cannibalism, scatological humour, sexual references, religious mockery, and the medieval grotesque. The young girl (often without her recognisable cloak or hood) will at times choose between travelling on a path of needles or pins, as well as consuming the body and blood of her grandmother, stripping naked (often burning her clothes in the fireplace) and joining her 'grandmother' in bed, escaping only after claiming she needs to urinate (Orenstein 2002; Spahr and Santos 2015; Tatar 1992; Zipes 1993). While these variants featured overt scatological references, cannibalism, monstrosity, and sexual references, it is important to note that many of them also featured the young girl saving herself, outsmarting the wolf, and escaping.

In the seventeenth-century transition from oral folktales to literary fairy tales, authors such as Charles Perrault transformed the fear of the wolf attack from literal to figurative. As Carolyn Daniel (2006, p. 157) notes, the 'real wolves' that were the danger in pre-modern Europe 'have since become a metaphor' for a different danger, namely, the threat of sexual assault and violence. Charles Perrault's 1697 adaptation 'served to frighten, indoctrinate and mold girls' (Spahr and Santos 2015, p. 54) and differs from oral variants in that it does not contain elements such as the path of needles and pins, cannibalism, and scatological references. Perrault's Red Riding Hood is charmed by the wolf and tricked into climbing into bed with him, ultimately being consumed. Written during the time of Louis XIV, Perrault's Red Riding Hood character drew inspiration from the court of the Sun King, echoing social and sexual concerns of the time, as seen via a stern *moralité* (warning the reader of being charmed by 'docile wolves' (in the Zipes (1993, p. 93) translation) who can talk their way into a young woman's salon and *ruelle*.[1] Orenstein 2002). Much like Red Riding Hood herself, those women of the Court who were charmed by these elegant, docile wolves were in danger of being consumed and 'consumed'.

The century after Perrault's retelling saw an increase in focus on the importance of education in childhood, with texts by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau contributing to this discourse, constructing the child as a *tabula rasa* and childhood as a time of great importance (Heywood 2017). As a result, the fairy tale '[took] up residency in the nursery' (Tatar (1992, p. 3)), as seen with the Grimm Brothers' collection of rewritten fairy tales, *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (*Children's and Household Tales*), featuring 'Rotkäppchen' (or 'Little Red Cap'). The tales were stripped of their burlesque humour, scatological references, and sexual undertones (although, often, the violence remained). The Red Cap in the Grimms' retelling, for example, does not remove her clothes piece by piece to discard them in the fire in a pseudo-striptease, as the young girl in 'The Story of Grandmother' does. The brothers' addition of a woodcutter, who cuts open the stomach of the wolf as he sleeps off his meal, allows both the girl and Grandmother to be saved. The explicit message of listening to your parents is reinforced with Red Cap's admonishment to herself ('Never again in your life will you stray by yourself into the woods when your mother has forbidden it', as translated in Zipes 1993, p. 137). Also present in the tale is a 'coda' in which the women catch another wolf, using their knowledge from their previous experience, providing a further overlay of civility on what was originally a tale of monstrosity, violence, and sexuality.

As previously noted, the larger matrix of *Sisters Red* and *Red Hood* should also be considered distinct anchor points for this research. The texts' publications bracket the 2010s, with *Sisters Red* released in 2010 and *Red Hood* in 2020. As a result, they reveal and interrogate specific cultural narratives surrounding, and the constructions of, adolescent girlhood, female sexuality, romance, and the female body. Marnina Gonick (2006, p. 5) acknowledges how the 'social and cultural fascination with girls' in the early twenty-first century also acts as 'an expression of the uncertainties, tensions, fears, and anxieties elicited by the rapid social, economic, and political changes taking place due to neoliberal politics' and this is clear within the texts. Inherent within these anxieties is the 'grand narrative' (Thiel-Stern 2014, p. 2) that has surrounded adolescent girls and young women for several decades; a conflicting construction of the figure as empowered and imperilled. The 'girl' is at once a vulnerable 'Ophelia' (Pipher 1994), a figure constructed as one in danger of forms of melancholia and 'postfeminist disorders' (McRobbie 2009), as well

as an 'empowered' neoliberal subject (Gill and Scharff 2011) who is at once an agent of self-transformation (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008), victim of perfectionism (McRobbie 2015), and 'spectacular' figure (Projansky 2014). These narratives surrounding girls and girlhood should not be considered as opposing forces but rather as figures that 'circulate simultaneously in contemporary media' and who 'in fact support each other' (Projansky 2014, p. 4) throughout the 2000s and 2010s. They embody an 'anxious repetition of both fetishistic desire and phobic derision' (Projansky 2014, p. 4) and lead to a focus on discipline and surveillance.

Integral to these narratives is also the tendency within mainstream discourse to focus on individual, internal issues that are faced by primarily white girls and applied to a universal 'girlhood' experience to create a specific conclusion—'only some girls are in a particular kind of crisis, and only some girls are worth saving' (Mazzarella 2019, p. 124). Furthermore, as Thiel-Stern (2014) and Egan and Hawkes (2012) argue, contemporary narratives surrounding girlhood draw on the concept of exnomination; they are 'understood as self-evident' (Egan and Hawkes 2012, p. 275) and, therefore, can at times remain unquestioned. Both *Sisters Red* and *Red Hood* embody this at-times unquestioned desire, derision, anxiety, and spectacularisation, revealing the ambivalence and anxiety surrounding girls and girlhood in the twenty-first century.

2. Wolves, Girls, and Hunters: Who Is Who in the Contemporary Fairy Tale?

2.1. Docile Wolves: The Cautionary Tale of Sisters Red

Of the texts studied, *Sisters Red* most explicitly reproduces narratives of female responsibility for male sexual violence via representations of the wolf attacks as sexual, as well as discourse surrounding the victims, ultimately presenting conflicted commentary on adolescent female sexuality. The text follows teenage sisters Scarlett and Rosie March and their neighbour and close friend Silas Reynolds as they hunt werewolves (named Fenris in the text) in small-town Georgia.[2] The trio began hunting after a Fenris attacked the March girls and their guardian, their grandmother Leoni. In the attack, Leoni was killed, and Scarlett was heavily injured, losing an eye and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result. The narrative begins with the hunting trio temporarily moving to Atlanta to prevent the discovery and transformation of 'The Potential', a seventh son of a seventh son who can be transformed into a Fenris if bitten during the first moon cycle following every seventh birthday. After Silas and Rosie begin a romantic relationship, his identity as the Potential is discovered, and he is in danger of capture and infection but ultimately avoids them.

The Fenris assume the role of the literal and figurative wolf in *Sisters Red*; they are werewolves who attack and kill young women, and they are metaphorical representations of sexual violence due to the nature of their attacks, which are sexualised within the narrative. When infected, a Fenris will slowly lose his soul and humanity, ultimately becoming a bloodlust-driven monster whose transformations from man to wolf are triggered by the presence of young women. In two separate interactions with Rosie, for example, Fenris are shown placing their hands in their pockets, attempting to hide the inadvertent growth of their claws that were the result of her presence, a thinly veiled analogy for male erection and arousal. Scarlett similarly encounters a Fenris who is unable to control his transformation so close to someone he considers a victim, noting that 'the hair on his arms has started to grow' (Pearce 2010, p. 13) in her presence.

Sisters Red was published during a time period that Fleur Diamond (2011, p. 43) argues was 'at best ambivalent' regarding the discourse on female sexual agency. The adolescent female body was constructed as vulnerable and at risk of sexual assault, sexualisation, and a loss of innocence (Thiel-Stern 2014). The text can be considered a contemporary 'cautionary tale', updated to reflect the anxieties surrounding female sexuality and the debates occurring regarding culpability in sexual violence. The Fenris attacks echo the concept of 'stranger rape' or the 'blitz attack' style of sexual assault: a 'typical' attack that occurs 'outdoors, at night, where the victim was alone and suddenly attacked by a male

stranger' ([Anderson 2011](), p. 225). In *Sisters Red*, the Fenris attack young women walking home late at night, often stalking bars and nightclubs. This representation of the 'blitz attack' draws heavily on discourses of female responsibility for their own safety, which ultimately conflicts with representations of the Fenris themselves as uncontrollable.

This conflict is clearly shown in a scene where Scarlett is Fenris hunting near a busy nightclub while in Atlanta. She is irritated by the girls she is protecting (who she refers to as 'Dragonflies' due to their colourful clothes and makeup), as she believes it is their behaviour that is luring Fenris to them. She compares the girls to 'some baby animal bleating [their] fool head[s] off', in a comparison that both infantilises and dehumanises them while reinforcing the predator/prey narrative ([Pearce 2010](), p. 115). Scarlett's opinion emphasises the narrative of female responsibility—it is the 'fool' behaviour of the girls that draws Fenris to them. Scarlett appears to criticize the girls for not engaging correctly with what Fiona [Vera-Gray]() ([2018]()) refers to as 'safety work', or the actions and behaviours women and girls perform to create (real and imagined) safety when out in public. This safety work includes not drawing attention to oneself via actions and behaviour. After observing these girls with 'something between disgust and intrigue', Silas 'pointedly' comments that 'it's like they're *trying* to be eaten' ([Pearce 2010](), p. 116). He theorises whether the girls would 'dress and act like that' (where 'that' implies drinking heavily, wearing revealing clothing, and walking home alone and intoxicated) if they were aware that it was luring Fenris to them ([Pearce 2010](), p. 116). Silas' question regarding the Dragonfly girls and their choice of clothes and behaviours suggests that he believes that, given knowledge of the Fenris and their preferred victims, women would alter their actions and dress. In doing so, *Sisters Red* draws both on the traditional narrative of 'Little Red Riding Hood' and contemporary attitudes regarding sexual assault.

As noted, Charles Perrault's literary version of 'Little Red Riding Hood' is accompanied by a moral explicitly warning the reader against seemingly charming wolves. Unlike the young girl of earlier variants, Perrault's Red Riding Hood is eaten by the wolf, unable to save herself or be saved—it is an explicit cautionary tale showing the result of letting one's guard down. Failing to follow this advice will lead to being consumed, a fact Perrault (cited in [Zipes 1993](), p. 93) claims is 'not so strange', suggesting the inevitability of being 'punished' for seemingly incorrect behaviour. *Sisters Red*, then, negotiates both traditional and contemporary fears surrounding young women and girls, particularly regarding sexual assault. Ultimately, however, the text reproduces the narrative of the cautionary tale—if one ventures into the woods alone, it will not be so strange if a wolf attacks you.

2.2. Red Hood: The Hunter and the Hunted

If *Sisters Red* reproduces the traditional narrative of female responsibility, echoing the ambivalence of the late 2000s and early 2010s, *Red Hood*, released a decade later, critiques it. The text critically engages not only with contemporary victim-blaming narratives but also interrogates the guilt the main character, Bisou Martel, feels at not helping her fellow classmates.[3] The narrative follows adolescent Bisou, who has lived with her previously estranged grandmother, Sybil Martel, for several years after her mother was killed by her father. After achieving menarche, Bisou simultaneously discovers that she has gained heightened senses, increased strength, and a supernatural awareness that occurs during menstruation and that the men and boys of her small town can transform into wolves and attack young women (a fact she discovers after being attacked by a classmate in his wolf form). Unlike in *Sisters Red*, no real explanation is given for the lycanthropic transformations, with the narrative focusing more on Bisou's relationship with boyfriend James, her growing friendship with classmates Maggie and Keisha, and the discovery of her hunter identity (an identity she shares with her grandmother).

While criticism and discussion of sexual harassment and violence are in no way distinct to the 2010s, it is clear that *Red Hood* negotiates a noticeably different cultural environment regarding female culpability than *Sisters Red* did a decade earlier. *Red Hood* was published after the explosion of mainstream discourse on entrenched sexual violence and harassment

experienced by girls and young women, as well as the solidification of the internet as an online space to discuss and critique narratives surrounding female culpability and sexuality. Online movements, such as Slut Walk, founded in 2011, and the #MeToo movement of 2017, invited international and cross-cultural online debate and consciousness-raising on entrenched and systemic issues regarding the reporting of sexual violence, as well as criticism of the victim-blaming that frequently occurred.[4] While still drawing on the cautionary elements of 'Little Red Riding Hood', *Red Hood* addresses the topic with nuance, ultimately reinforcing male responsibility for their actions. This is explored through the comparison between Sybil's college experience and Bisou's classmate Maggie.

In Sybil's first year at college in the 1970s, a female student was killed in the woods, and '[b]efore she was even in the ground' rumours began spreading about her behaviour (Arnold 2020, p. 143):

> [n]ot that she *deserved* what happened to her, of course, no one was saying *that*, but that if she hadn't been out so late, way past curfew, and if she hadn't been known to be so free and loose with boys, with men, then she would have been perfectly safe in her own bed that night. (Arnold 2020, p. 143)

As with Silas and Scarlett's attitudes in *Sisters Red*, the unnamed university student has become responsible for her own attacks and death. They had not followed correct 'rape avoidance advice' (Curchin 2019, sec. 1, para. 1), such as not being out late at night while alone, remaining sober, or wearing conservative clothing.

This blame was similarly assigned to Sybil's roommate, Laura, after she was attacked and killed by a wolf. Laura had also been seen ignoring 'rape avoidance advice' and safety work—being heavily intoxicated at parties, wearing short skirts, and 'flirting outrageously with all the guys' (Arnold 2020, p. 148). Sybil notes that a former high school teacher of Laura's had claimed that she was '[t]he kind of girl who was asking for trouble' (Arnold 2020, p. 148). Curchin (2019) argues that rape avoidance advice may, at times, strengthen and reinforce rape myths, victim blaming, and justification on behalf of the perpetrators. Laura is presented as a girl who was 'asking for trouble' (Arnold 2020, p. 148) by not following this advice, and in doing so, she is assigned blame. Sybil notes that the construction of Laura as a 'girl who didn't keep her knees closed' contributed to her legacy in becoming a 'warning' and 'morality tale for the rest of us' (Arnold 2020, p. 48).

Sybil negotiates her own perceived culpability in classmate Dennis Cartwright's attempt to sexually assault her. Curchin (2019, sec. 3, para. 3) argues that '[w]hen seeking the real cause of an incident we are usually looking for a deviation from the normal course of events', trying to provide justification or explanation for what happened. Sybil, for example, rationalises her date with Dennis as the result of loneliness (she had remained on campus during the winter break) and 'attention from a boy like Dennis—so handsome, so popular, the kind of boy the world was built for' (Arnold 2020, p. 150). However, Sybil did not regret killing Dennis in self-defence that same night, especially after she discovered that he had killed Laura. In comparison to the attacks on Laura and the unnamed college student, Sybil notes, 'no one tsked about how Dennis shouldn't have been alone in the woods, no one reported having seen him drunk and disorderly in the days and weeks before his death' (Arnold 2020, p. 152). Furthermore, no rumours were created surrounding his behaviours, as seen with all the victims.

Bisou, conversely, uncovers her own biases and attempts at rationalisation through her emerging friendship with classmate Maggie. While both girls are in the same friendship group at their high school (as their boyfriends are on the same football team), they do not become close until after the attack and death of Maggie's boyfriend, Tucker. Maggie is not a victim of a wolf attack; however, she is exposed to rumourmongering surrounding her sexuality, similar to that of victims, prior to and after Tucker's death. Maggie had been the subject of sexualised rumours at their high school ('[...] the things she was into were too weird even for Tucker [...] she begged Tucker to have a three-way with her and some guy from her job, which was why Tucker finally broke up with her.') which led to her being isolated from her peers (Arnold 2020, p. 39). After Tucker's death, this criticism increases,

with comments on her clothing and behaviour. A used condom is placed in her bag, and she is sent a graphic photo from a classmate featuring a knife placed next to the classmate's erect penis. She is advised by the police to apply for a restraining order and purchase a dog for protection but is unable to stop the harassment and drops out of school as a result.

Bisou's reluctance to foster a friendship is clearly framed as a result of the contemporary notion of caution and responsibility. Bisou notes that this hesitance is 'something to contemplate later' (Arnold 2020, p. 102). Regarding the rumours surrounding Maggie, Bisou wonders 'why [she] believed Tucker, who [she] never really trusted, instead of Maggie, who had never given [Bisou] a reason not to' (Arnold 2020, p. 102). She believes herself to be responsible for the rumour-spreading due to her inaction and feels immense shame and revulsion regarding her own complicit nature in allowing these rumours to continue. However, the contemporary use of media and the online space as a means of consciousness-raising, attention-drawing, and solidarity reveals Bisou's ultimate 'success' in moving beyond traditional narratives of blame. An article is published in the school newspaper calling for a show of solidarity against the rumourmongering and harassment Maggie is experiencing. Written by Bisou and Maggie's mutual friend Keisha Montgomery, the article calls for students to wear black nail polish in solidarity with Maggie (to 'show [the harassers] our claws' and 'be loud. Together' (Arnold 2020, p. 238)). A wall in the bathroom at their school becomes a space for girls to share stories of harassment and violence. Both acts could be classified as what Clark-Parsons (2021, p. 362) calls 'a contentious performance', where the personal is made political through its visibility, 'bridging the individual with the collective and illustrating the systemic nature of social injustice'.

Clark-Parsons (2021) and others, such as Banet-Weiser (2018), have acknowledged the potential for what is often shorthanded as 'hashtag activism' to remain a spectacle incapable of implementing true change. Bisou, however, resists reproducing mainstream myths surrounding sexual violence and responsibility through her interrogation of her own beliefs. In encapsulating each end of the decade, *Sisters Red* and *Red Hood* embody both the ways in which the fairy tale, linked to contemporary popular literature via the 'web', embraces cultural change and allows for the exploration and critical analysis of social and cultural norms and ideals. In opposition to Perrault's construction of Red Riding Hood as at fault, and *Sisters Red's* emphasis on adhering to 'rape avoidance advice' leading to specific responsibility of the women and girls, *Red Hood* provides a nuanced examination of the traditional moralising of 'Little Red Riding Hood', emphasising that the 'true' wolves are at fault.

3. Bloody Delights: Violence and the Grotesque

3.1. Blood Moon: Menstruation and Violence in Red Hood

In her discussion of female lycanthropy, June Pulliam (2014, p. 78) argues that contemporary female werewolves often represent 'a more physical and graphic manifestation of the Other' through a connection to their animal and primal instincts. This is particularly prevalent in the contemporary supernatural romance genre, with supernatural (and supernatural-adjacent) female characters utilising this distancing from reality to explore discourses surrounding the female body. While Bisou is not a werewolf, her identity as a hunter problematises her existence as entirely mundane, removing her from the 'human' world and allowing for the negotiation of her animal or primal instincts. Within *Red Hood*, this physical and graphic delineation between human and Other is shown through discourses on menstruation, drawing on well-established narratives regarding the female body, the abject, and bodily fluids.

Bodily fluids are significant in an individual's negotiation of vulnerability, permeability, and mortality, identifying the danger of what Douglas (cited in Grosz 1994) refers to as the borderline state. The leaking body reveals the 'hierarchy of propriety' (Grosz 1994, p. 195), with menstruation, in particular, signalling the female body as something to be sanitised, deodorised, and 'managed'. Menstruation and the importance of menstrual management remained a social stigma in the 2000s and 2010s (Fahs 2017). Menstruation,

however, more specifically, the menstrual cycle of Bisou (and, to a lesser extent, the former cycles of Sybil) is integral to the narrative of *Red Hood*. It is the onset of menses that provides the Martel women with the heightened senses, strength, and awareness that allows them to fight werewolves, and their cessation, whether temporary via childbirth and breastfeeding or permanently via menopause, removes them. Lycanthropy in the text is an exclusively male affliction that is, like 'traditional' werewolf narratives, connected to the full moon. Simultaneously, however, the menstrual cycles of the Martel women are similarly associated with the full moon (known colloquially as a 'red moon cycle') and integral to their hunting ability, providing them with heightened strength, sensory awareness, and perception. Menstruation is also present in earlier interpretations of 'Little Red Riding Hood', with the paths of needles and pins that the young girl must traverse often understood as indicative of menarche and puberty (Orenstein 2002; Zipes 1993), as well as later retellings, such as Carter's (2012) 'The Company of Wolves', featuring a young girl on the brink of her first period. Compelling within the narrative is the simultaneous intrigue and disgust Bisou narrates in relation to her menstrual cycles—it is at once a source of power, strength, and connection, as well as shame, fear, and the grotesque. In this way, the text draws on the discourse of the female body as 'inscribed as a mode of seepage'; as leaking, uncontrollable and uncontrolled, and as viscous (Grosz, cited in Bobel 2010, p. 31) while also attempting to reclaim and renegotiate the concept via narratives of feminine power.

Lauren Rosewarne (2012, p. 15) argues that alongside the 'general cultural imperative to keep menstruation hidden', there exists an even more explicit and 'specific demand', which is 'to keep it hidden *from men*'. Previous myths surrounding menstrual blood and menstruating women include the ability of menstruating women to curdle milk, prevent bread dough from rising, and spoil crops (Rosewarne 2012). Menstruating women were seen as literally and spiritually polluted, with menstrual blood seen as an abject bodily fluid akin to urine, feces, or vomit. While no longer associated with the curdling of milk or the spoiling of crops, a menstruating woman is still subject to narratives of pollution, disgust, and shame. These narratives retain 'powerful implications for the regulation and control of women's bodies', as well as contemporary mainstream discourse on the female body (Fahs 2017, p. 84). Rosewarne (2012, p. 101) argues that menstruation is often considered a 'sanitary event', that is, associated with the confines of the bathroom (itself a space of discovery, separation, and privacy—in media, it is frequently the space of discovery for a character's first menses, and also alluded to as a sanctuary away from the performance of femininity). When removed from this space, then, when smeared on sheets or towels, when shown 'uncollected' or uncontained, disgust at menstrual blood is seen as a 'rational response' (Rosewarne 2012, p. 101) and emphasises the aforementioned need for regulation and control. This is echoed in Bisou's first menses, as well as in Arnold's descriptions of menstruation throughout.

Bisou exists in a predominantly female space, living with her grandmother and socialising mainly with her two female friends, Maggie and Keisha. Despite this, her first menses occurs not only within the 'natural world' of the woodlands near her home but during what she refers to as 'the absolutely worst moment, the most mortifying, terrible instant' (Arnold 2020, p. 27): when receiving oral sex from boyfriend James in his car after their high school's prom night. Bisou's mortification and lack of preparedness echo the construction of the female body as 'intrinsically unpredictable, leaky and disruptive' (Price and Shildrick 1999, p. 2), something to be constrained and managed. Despite the continual connection between menstruation and heightened abilities, her reaction is immediate revulsion: a 'dread, and disgust, and shame' (Arnold 2020, p. 14) and self-castigation ('[...] how dare you bleed, how dare you be so gross' (Arnold 2020, p. 17). This draws on the well-established 'fusing [of] bodily and domestic expectations' that Fahs (2017, p. 92) argues accompanies discourses on menstrual sex—both the perceived urgency surrounding the need to clean or rectify the mess and the abject response work together to create discomfort and reinforce narratives of disgust. Bisou's disgusted response is reinforced the next day when she sees

James again ("I am so, so sorry. It's so gross. I don't know what to say" (Arnold 2020, p. 39)), despite James' nonchalant acceptance. Bisou's immediate response is to flee, to 'keep it hidden *from men*' (Rosewarne 2012, p. 15), leaving the car and running into the woods, and it is as a result of fleeing that she encounters and kills her first werewolf.

This relocation from the sanitary (and sanitised) space of the bathroom to the natural and wild world, as well as the connection to the moon cycle, creates a construction of Bisou as almost 'creature-like' and Other, and, at times, an eroticised figure focused on the sensory. When fleeing James' car, her dress slips as she runs, leaving her bare-chested (Arnold 2020, p. 16). When fighting the wolf, her dress slips again, her 'breasts half out', 'nipples tight[ening[against the cold' (Arnold 2020, pp. 18–19). Throughout the scene, she fights the wolf while actively bleeding, with these descriptions focusing on the sensory nature of the experience (and drawing on the 'graphic manifestation' (Pulliam 2014, p. 77) of her newfound identity as Other); it 'drip[s] from the core of [her], down the insides of [her] thighs' (Arnold 2020, p. 17), it is a 'hot pulse' (Arnold 2020, p. 19) or 'gush' (Arnold 2020, p. 21) that 'emerges from [her] center' (Arnold 2020, p. 19) and runs down her legs. This is similar to the language describing Bisou's orgasm, as 'gush' is 'the word, the only word', to describe the sensation (Arnold 2020, p. 14). In presenting menstruation in this way, *Red Hood* echoes Bobel's (2010, p. 31) description of it as 'leaky, liquid, [and] flowing', associated with sexuality. Even when negotiating the 'menstrual mess' (Rosewarne 2012, p. 84) once home, the language used is evocative and explicit. Bisou describes the 'thick rivulet of blood' (Arnold 2020, p. 27) that emerges from her while she urinates. It is 'viscous' in comparison; 'it moves slowly [her] urine shoots and sprays, but the blood languishes, takes its time' (Arnold 2020, p. 27). When removing a tampon, it 'dangles like a hooked fish' and is a 'triumph of gore' at the end of a 'blood-clotted string', 'a clump of some gelatinous red thing adhered to its side' (Arnold 2020, p. 53). This at once removes *Red Hood* from earlier narratives surrounding menstruation as something that is not discussed or presented within media (Rosewarne 2012) while also connecting back, via the web, to the older variants of 'Little Red Riding Hood', such as 'The Grandmother's Tale', that referenced bodily functions and fluids.

Chantal Bourgalt Du Coudray (2006) argues that anxiety surrounding lycanthropy is the result of the disruption of boundaries between the human and animal world. For Bisou, her menstruation signals the disruption between human and animal, or, at least, human and 'heightened human', upsetting the usually coherent and separate identities of human and animal, building on the already-disrupted notion of who the 'real' wolves of the narrative are. This is continued in scenes where Bisou fights the wolves. In the first instance, with the 'Tawny wolf' (who is revealed as classmate Tucker), Bisou's lack of preparation leads her to fight in an 'animal', desperate way. She hits him in the face with a branch, 'twisting his head hard to his left, a spray of spit and blood erupting from his mouth' (Arnold 2020, p. 20), the inverse of Bisou's pulsing or dripping menstrual blood. She gouges his eyes, the 'meaty wet *squish* of his right eyeball skewered on the point of the stick' (Arnold 2020, p. 22) and, finally, she runs his head into a tree to break his neck, an act accompanied by a primal scream evoking that of the 'final girl' in the horror genre. When attacking her second wolf, her classmate Phillip, she stabs him with a claw necklace that was gifted by Sybil, leading to a 'hot jet of blood' pulsing over her face (Arnold 2020, p. 124). Bisou ends up covered in blood and gore, and when she showers after, the 'wolf blood and womb blood' (Arnold 2020, p. 133) mix in the drain. When she fights and ultimately kills her father, she describes herself as 'wild with bloodlust' as she gouges at him, echoing the hand-to-hand combat style of fighting she used when encountering her first wolf (Arnold 2020, p. 273). Boundaries between human and animal are blurred, echoing traditional anxieties surrounding shapeshifting but also anxieties surrounding menstruation.

In achieving menarche, Bisou Martel gains the ability to hunt and fight werewolves via the heightened senses and strength it affords her. Simultaneously, Bisou represents the 'coded exploration of issues of gender, sexuality and agency' that Pulliam (2014, p. 20) argues often accompanies representations of female lycanthropy in contemporary supernat-

ural literature despite not becoming a werewolf. She is afforded freedom in her ability to fight supernatural beings yet remains bound by her biology, continually leaking, staining, and bleeding.

3.2. Sexualised Consumption, Revulsion, and Consumable Objects in Sisters Red

In opposition to *Red Hood's* at-times abject female body, narratives of violence and disgust present in *Sisters Red* focus on representations of the Fenris. More specifically, the monstrosity of the Fenris manifests not just in their lycanthropic identities (as discussed in the previous section) but via malodour, 'monstrous eating', and disgust. Within *Sisters Red*, the monstrosity of the Fenris is reinforced through their unpleasant scent, which at times acts not only as representative of their villainy but as a physical manifestation of sexual violence. In doing so, *Sisters Red* draws heavily on the traditional 'monstrosity' of the wolf figure while still condemning the female victims of Fenris attacks, ultimately further complicating the narrative of female responsibility versus the uncontrollable male. As a result, the text reproduces the well-established figure of the 'girl-at-risk', a narrative that constructs the girl as simultaneously in physical, emotional, and psychological danger while also maintaining discourses of responsibility.

The sense of smell is perhaps the most reviled and revered of the senses, an 'avid' reminder of 'our animal origins' (Miller, cited in Daniel 2006, p. 160). There is a distinct overlap between perceptions of physical and moral cleanliness (responses to moral transgressions may echo disgust responses, for example), and this is frequently seen in the discourse surrounding malodour in particular (Gilchrist and Schnall 2018; Lee and Schwarz 2011). As discussed, a Fenris loses his soul and 'humanity' over several years after infection. This is shown, in part, through their change in scent, which is described as rotting garbage, death, and decay, as well as spoiled or soured milk. The scent of the Fenris acts as a manifestation of their corrupted humanity. Their scent is that of human, 'civilised' items, such as food and milk, that have rotted or soured, much like their own humanity has similarly spoiled. Of note is the presence of the soured milk scent; the scent of milk has strong associations with childhood innocence, comfort, stability, and motherhood (Daniel 2006).[5] Through their bite, a Fenris can create (or 'birth') a new Fenris, creating life in an act of corrupted (or spoiled) motherhood that is echoed in their similarly corrupted scent.

The hunters frequently describe being overpowered and nauseated by the scent, which 'gets into your skin and sticks around for ages' (Pearce 2010, p. 33). The characters are often shown choking or gagging when near Fenris, and this is reinforced in a scene that underlines both the revulsion and disgust associated with the Fenris' scent, as well as the construction of their attacks as heavily sexualised. In this specific scene, Scarlett is knocked to the ground when fighting a Fenris, who then pins her down and 'exhales almost directly into [her] throat', causing her to choke and gag (Pearce 2010, p. 18). The scent of the Fenris assumes an almost physical state, preventing Scarlett from breathing and making her gag. The Fenris' breath, and by extension his scent, is presented not only as corporeal but phallic, explicitly drawing on the narrative of sexualised werewolf attacks and sexual violence present in both *Sisters Red*, specifically, and the 'Little Red Riding Hood' tradition in general. The actions of this Fenris can be interpreted as implied oral sexual violence, with Scarlett as the victim. In comparison to *Red Hood*, then, it is not the female body that is 'leaky' but the Fenris body, with the Fenris' breath blurring boundaries between internal and external, becoming a physical reminder of the 'Otherness' of the Fenris.

Further blurring these boundaries is the representation of Fenris attacks as both sexual and gastronomic, strengthening the connection between *Sisters Red* and the larger 'Little Red Riding Hood' story. Daniel (2006, p. 155) refers to the wolf attacks in traditional retellings of 'Little Red Riding Hood' as both 'explicitly gastronomic' and 'implicitly carnal', with representations of the wolf often leaning towards the lascivious. This association is further problematised when considering the gendered associations of consumption and food. Emily Douglas (2013, pp. 244–45), for example, argues that women are frequently 'represented as edible', and this edibility is 'primarily a metaphor for sexual consumption'.

Existing alongside this association of the sexual with the alimentary, however, is the inherent invocation of notions of the 'Other'. Characters, creatures, and monsters in fiction and media who eat 'badly', or incorrectly, have existed for centuries in genres such as the fairy tale and remain a 'mainstay of much grotesque-horror fiction aimed at both children and adults' (Daniel 2006, p. 139). This monstrous consumption uncovers the constructed nature of the 'food chain', highlighting the corporeality, vulnerability, and, inevitably, the 'edibility' of the human body (Daniel 2006). Doing so makes explicit what Lorna Piatti-Farnell (2017, p. 4) refers to as the 'unavoidable Otherness' of eating—food is an intrinsically foreign matter that we must incorporate into ourselves to gain nourishment. To identify something as edible or as food is to identify it as 'Other', and a sentient being eating a 'non-food' item is to identify that being as somehow 'Other'. To identify a human as an item to be consumed is to problematise this label of 'Other', to blur boundaries between consumer and consumed.

Sisters Red draws on the long tradition of the wolf attacks in 'Little Red Riding Hood' representing sexual violence; the Fenris' literal consumption of their young female victims figuratively standing in for sexual assault. As a result, the novel adopts the contemporary representation of woman-as-edible while also continuing the history of the cautionary tale. Like the wolf figure in 'Little Red Riding Hood' tales, the Fenris deliberately seek out their victims, in this case, young girls. They have what Daniel (2006, p. 161) describes as 'an uncontrolled appetite for the wrong thing'. The Fenris engage in exophagy, or cannibalism outside of one's social group, as a display of power; they eat most of their victims, with a fondness for the heart, leaving only a 'small piece' (Pearce 2010, p. 170) behind, to be discovered by friends and family. In doing so, they blur the divide between human and monster, a distortion echoed in their liminal identities as shapeshifters.

This implicit carnality of the attacks is introduced in an early scene where a Fenris in his human form watches (then-children) Scarlett and Rosie play outside their home. While watching them, the man's eyes grow dark, 'his smile more forced, and he licked his lips in a way that made the older sister's stomach tighten' (Pearce 2010, p. 2). The Fenris licking his lips as he watches the girls conflates the gustatory and sexual while constructing Scarlett as edible, the focus of his 'hunger'. This conflation is reinforced throughout the narrative with the aforementioned descriptions of Fenris attempting to hide their inadvertent transformations (such as placing their hands in their pockets to hide their growing claws or the hair on their arms lengthening)—an act that is presented as analogous to hiding an erection. They are described as wanting to 'devour' their victims; at one point, Scarlett notes that 'it's *hunger* their eyes are lit with' when they hunt (Pearce 2010, pp. 10–11). This is further emphasised in a later scene when the now-teenage Scarlett is being stalked by a Fenris on a solo hunt, where he responds to her hunting lure: presenting herself as a lost young girl in a 'bad part' of town, which she says 'get[s] their blood pumping' (Pearce 2010, p. 10). The Fenris 'wants to tear [Scarlett] apart, to dig his teeth into [her] throat' (Pearce 2010, p. 15).

The edibility of the Fenris victims is further reinforced by the ways in which the hunting trio discusses and disparages the girls they protect. Silas explicitly constructs the female body as an edible object for the Fenris by describing Atlanta as like a 'buffet table', (Pearce 2010, p. 122) because of the high population of young defenceless women served passively for Fenris to pick and choose. In doing so, Silas invokes the 'edibility' of the female body, Othering them through his construction of the girls as food items. Silas suggests an adaptation to the trio's hunting strategy in light of this buffet table of victims, that Scarlett and Rosie '[b]e the dessert' (Pearce 2010, p. 122), presenting themselves as appetising morsels for the Fenris. In doing so, he does not differentiate between the nameless victims they protect and Scarlett and Rosie, temporarily assuming the mindset of the Fenris. As seen in the previous section, Scarlett also likens the victims she protects to bleating baby animals, invoking a comparison to lambs or kids. Through these comparisons, the boundaries between 'Food' and 'Not-Food' are blurred; the women are Othered via their association with 'edibility'.

This construction of the female body as edible and as Other further echoes the narrative of the 'girl-at-risk' or the 'Ophelia' construction of girlhood, which was well established in the 2000s and early 2010s. Frequently associated with the 1990s work of psychologists such as Mary Pipher (whose 1994 *Reviving Ophelia* helped popularise the term), the Ophelia or girl-at-risk is emotionally and physically vulnerable and 'voiceless', unable to elucidate her needs and desires. While this creation of the at-risk girl figure did initiate discussion of and focus on the girl as a separate subject for investigation and analysis, it led to 'vulnerability discourse' permeating disciplines and, at times, reinforcing essentialised notions of gender and sexuality (Gonick 2006; Projansky 2014). The Dragonfly victims of the Fenris, for example, are infantilised and represented as helpless due to their comparison to baby animals. If Bisou is presented as gaining strength from her 'creatureliness' or Othering, the female characters in *Sisters Red* are instead further stripped of autonomy. In doing so, this further complicates the narratives of responsibility for sexual assault, ultimately reinforcing Diamond's (2011, p. 43) identification of the era as 'ambivalent' regarding female sexuality.

Marina Warner (2007, p. 386) argues that 'pedophiles are our late millennial ogres', in a statement that echoes Angela Carter's (2012, p. 280) acknowledgement that the 'worst wolves are hairy on the inside'; their monstrosity the result of their actions, rather than physicality or appearance. The threat of consumption via wolf is, in many contemporary retellings of the tale, a metaphor for sexual violence rather than the literal consumption of stories such as 'The Grandmother's Tale' or the Perrault or Grimm variants. In *Sisters Red*, the Fenris are hairy on the inside and outside, visible monsters whose literal and metaphorical consumption of their young female victims reinforces contemporary fears regarding male violence and female safety.

4. Conclusions

In this research, I examined the ways in which two retellings of the 'Little Red Riding Hood' fairy tale, *Sisters Red* and *Red Hood*, reaffirm the ongoing identification of the fairy tale genre as a space for cultural commentary, negotiation, and reproduction. Each text draws from their social and cultural context and, in doing so, reveals the change in attitudes surrounding female sexuality, negotiations of the female body, and sexual responsibility that occurred across the 2010s. Using an approach that acknowledged both literary and cultural analyses, I argued that the two texts negotiate these concerns in similar, yet at times opposing, ways. Each interrogates the well-established identity of 'Little Red Riding Hood' as a cautionary tale, with *Sisters Red* drawing on established narratives of risk and responsibility to ultimately reproduce female responsibility, while *Red Hood* reflects the changes to mainstream discourse on the topic, explicitly critiquing these attitudes. I then explored the ways in which the grotesque and disgust were represented in the texts, drawing a connection between these contemporary narratives and the medieval grotesque of 'The Grandmother's Tale' reinforcing the dynamism, malleability, and connection of the fairy tale web. Here, the two texts provided vastly different representations and interrogations of the topic. *Sisters Red* makes an overt connection between the Fenris and disgust via representations of scent and sexualised consumption, making explicit the disgust felt regarding sexual violence and the contemporary 'monstrosity' of assault. Conversely, *Red Hood* draws on narratives of menstruation, 'Othering', and the perceived permeability and leakiness of the female body. Bisou's menstruation is at once a sort of power, strength, and heightened perception, as well as a site for embarrassment, shame, and, at times, sensuality.

In their belief that the adaptation of a tale to suit a child audience causes a 'loss' or lack, scholars like Tatar (1992) and Reynolds (2007) acknowledge the association between the fairy tale genre and darkness, horror, and the grotesque. Fairy tale retellings have long contained violence, sexuality, grotesque references, horror, gore, and darkness, the intensity of which will ebb and flow depending on the form the retellings take. In conceptualising the genre as a 'web', connections are made between the traditional fairy tale and genres such as horror, the gothic, romance, tales of enchantment, and YA fiction. In doing so, space

is provided for malleability and fluidity, as well as for the subversion and deconstruction of traditional and well-established social and cultural norms. In her analysis of contemporary YA horror, Pulliam (2014, p. 20) theorised that the horror elements of the genre allow for 'a coded exploration of gender, sexuality and agency' due to the presence of monstrosity, particularly that associated with the feminine. While the texts studied in this research were not explicitly 'horror', their representations of monstrosity, fear, and violence similarly encouraged this coded exploration. As part of the long tradition of the fairy tale and as part of the fairy tale 'web', the texts studied show complexity and contradiction. They at once uncover, critique, reproduce, and adapt social and cultural constructions and expectations of the culture in which they were produced. Furthermore, they reinforce the necessity of the contemporary fairy tale retelling as a space for this criticism and adaptation.

Notes

[1] The translation of the word *ruelles* is an interesting one; literally translated to 'alleyway', it is also used to refer to the gap between the bed and the wall, implying a level of sexual, or at least intimate, closeness.

[2] *Sisters Red* (and the *Retold Fairy Tales* series it is a part of) is a pastiche of folklore and mythology, as seen via the naming of the Fenris (derived from the Norse Fenrir).

[3] It is important to note that *Red Hood* is written almost entirely in the second person, with the exception of the chapters narrated in the first person by Sybil Martel. This echoes Angela Carter's 'The Company of Wolves', which similarly uses the second person, creating a sense of immediacy and participation.

[4] While the MeToo movement exploded in popularity and recognition in 2017 after the exposure of producer Harvey Weinstein as a sexual predator, activist Tarana Burke created the campaign in 2006 on MySpace in solidarity with sexual assault victims she encountered at her non-profit organization (Clark-Parsons 2021).

[5] As discussed in the previous section, spoiled or soured milk also has links to previous menstrual taboos and myths, as the close proximity of a menstruating woman to milk was thought to lead to its curdling.

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