The Oral Version of Little Red Riding Hood: A Reflection of French Rural Life in Middle Age

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Abstract

This paper discusses the oral version of a well known story for children: Little Red Riding Hood. Rather than discussing the folktale in general, this paper concentrates on a French version that is hardly known to many children, on how the version of the story reflects French rural life in Middle Age.

Keywords: folktale, children, children’s literature

During our childhood, we have been introduced to a faraway land where everything seems to be very enchanting. It is also the place where we have made friends with some remarkable people and animals. Each of them always has a different tale to tell. Some are funny, some are scary, and some are heartwarming. Among them, there is one special friend that we will never forget: a particular girl who never goes around without a red cap or hood on her head – one particular girl of the name Little Red Riding Hood. No one will ever forget the eerie account of her meeting with a wolf which later tricks her into believing him to be her grandmother. Yet, do you know that the tale which she told a long time ago is different from the one which she told us now?

Indisputably, the story of our dearest friend is one of the most famous ones introduced to children. It is so famous that if our mind were a library, most of us would very likely to find in one corner of the shelves, a book titled “Little Red Riding Hood”. Indeed, this particular folktale has been read and retold over and over again for generations throughout the
world. Therefore it is understandable that
there are many versions of “Little Red
Riding Hood” known to date since people
tend to make some changes based on
their cultural values so that their children
can relate to the story. The most widely
read version is probably the Grimm
Brothers’ version, where both Little Red
Riding Hood and her grandmother survive
after being gobbled by the wolf.

There is one version of “Little Red Riding
Hood” that is hardly known nowadays. It
is a French version, but it is not
Perrault’s. It is an oral version from the
French countryside during Middle Age [400
- 1500 A.D] and has been claimed as the
‘original’ story of “Little Red Riding
Hood” (Windling). The story is called
“The Grandmother’s Tale”. The girl in
the story does not wear the famous red
cap or hood, but she has the capability to
save herself and therefore does not need
any hunter to help — which was a small
detail added by the Grimm Brothers
themselves. Although the oral version and
Perrault’s version share the same origin,
they are actually quite different in some
ways. There are two shocking scenes
which can be found in the oral version,
but cannot be found in Perrault’s: the
scene of the heroine eating her
grandmother’s body parts and the detailed
scene of the heroine undressing herself.
Any sane people from the 21st century are
very likely to think that the oral version
is very preposterous and barbaric, and
that it only comes out from the dark
imagination or insanity of the Erzähler —
Teller of Tales. Yet, folktales are
adaptations of life, as Kready stated in
That means a folktale must not have any
absurdity. We think the oral version is
absurd and ‘uncivilized’ because we
relate it to our lifestyle now, but it is not
absurd if we relate it to the social
condition during Middle Age. The oral
version of “Little Red Riding Hood” can
actually be a true reflection of the French
rural society in Middle Age.

There are six points in the story that can
show it to be the reflection of the rural
community at that time: cannibalism, the
choice of path, the use of ‘bzou’
[werewolf] instead of ‘wolf’, the act of
storing some body parts of the
grandmother, the characters of
laundresses, and the tying of the heroine’s
ankle by the bzou.

4 Cannibalism

“...Are you hungry?”
“Yes, I am, Grandmother.”

“Then cook the meat that you’ll find on
the shelf. Are you thirsty?”
“Yes, I am, Grandmother.”

“Then drink the bottle of wine you’ll
find on the shelf beside it, child.”
As the young girl cooked and ate the
meat, a little cat piped up and cried,
“You are eating the flesh of your
grandmother!”
"Throw your shoe at that noisy cat," said the bzou, and so she did. 
As she drank the wine, a small bird cried, "You are drinking the blood of your grandmother!"
"Throw your other shoe at that noisy bird," said the bzou, and so she did.

The Grandmother’s Tale- 
(English-translated version)

In 1300s, there was a period of a great natural disaster in France which was named ‘Little Ice Age’. It rained so much that the crops failed and therefore it resulted in famine and cannibalism (Dutch). It can be imagined how the life at the rural was at that time. Before, it was already quite hard. With the disaster, the people who lived in the rural area were forced to the extreme to fend for themselves. Cannibalism seemed to be the only way to survive.

In her book “A Study of Fairy Tales”, Kready stated that folktales/fairy tales are related to life standards. When the rural people had thought of cannibalism as a part of their lifestyles, the acts of eating other man’s body parts were very likely to be found in the tales they produced. Therefore it is not a surprise that the heroine in “The Grandmother’s Tale” eats her grandmother’s body parts. Some folklorists have tried to analyze the meaning behind the cannibalism. One example of the analyses belonged to Yvonne Verdier, a French sociologist. She brought up the theme of a same-sex rivalry which was quoted in Vandendrope’s essay “D’un conte à sa parodie: Le Petit Chaperon rouge de Jacques Ferron” (2000): “The rivalry which goes on until eliminating physically – that is the relationship between women” (my translation).

In her opinion, the act of cannibalism in “Little Red Riding Hood” is actually a reflection of the relationship between women in real life. However, it still does not explain why the Erzähler used ‘cannibalism’ to show the elimination. Why did he not use another symbol? Throwing the grandmother’s body to the river, for example, can be a more ‘civilized’ symbol for “eliminating physically”. The most possible reason is that cannibalism was seen as a ‘civilized’ act by the people in the rural area in Middle Age. It is not, therefore, derived from the insanity of the story teller.

❖ The Choice of Path

In the oral version, the bzou asks the heroine which path she will choose to go to her grandmother’s house, The Path of Needles or the Path of Pins (le chemin des épinglettes ou des aiguillettes). The heroine answers that she chooses the Path of Pins. The bzou then chooses the Path of Needles.
Many folklorists had tried to analyze the choice of the path in the story. Yet, they failed and concluded that it was not of any significance. Paul Delarue and Marc Soriano viewed the choice between pins and needles as a nonsense thing, a “deliberate absurdity” (Qtd. in Windling). Then in 1978, Verdier, who had been studying the traditions and rituals of French rural women, showed in her essay “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge dans la traditional orale” that the choice of the path is, in fact, significant. It turns out that a pin seems to be the symbol of maidenhood:

In villages, girls who were fifteen years of age were sent to spend one winter with local seamstresses. It was not concerned much with learning to “work”, to sew or in other words to use needles. It was particularly concerned with how the girls refine themselves, learn how to adorn themselves, to dress up. In describing what the young girls were doing, the seamstresses would say “They have been gathering pins.” Spending the winter with the seamstresses and taking part in the ceremonial entry into the age group consecrated to Saint Catherine signified that the girls had entered maidenhood, which meant the permission to go dancing, have lovers, of which the pin seemed to be the symbol. *(my translation)*

Meanwhile, a needle symbolizes sexual maturity. Verdier (1978) wrote, “As for the needles, threaded through its eye, in the folklore of seamstresses it refers to an emphatically sexual symbolism.” Indeed, in some parts of Europe, prostitutes used to wear needles on their sleeves to advertise their profession (Qtd in Windling)

When the heroine chooses the Path of Pins, it means that she has entered maidenhood, the time for her to have a lover. As for the *bzou*, who chooses the Path of Needles, it shows that he is much more mature than the heroine in terms of sexual matters. These representations convey the significance of ‘pin’ and ‘needle’ in the story, and at the same time completely dismiss the views of some folklorists who consider the choice between ‘pin’ and ‘needle’ preposterous and insignificant. ‘Pin’ and ‘Needle’ are parts of the rural life rituals which origin can be traced back to Middle Age.

> The use of ‘bzou’ instead of ‘wolf’

In both Perrault’s and Grimms’ versions, we know that the one who eats Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother is a wolf. However, in the oral version, the one who tries to eat them is a werewolf — *bzou*. Why did the story teller use ‘werewolf’ instead of ‘wolf’? Once more, there is a reasonable reason for it if we
look it from the context of rural France in Middle Age. It is recorded that in the 14th century, France was in complete turmoil with the occurrence of ‘Little Ice Age’, Bubonic Plague, and Social upheavals (Dutch). One effect of these misfortunes is the hysteria among the French; and the most popular one was the werewolf trials. There so many stories about werewolves which emerged that it was as if werewolves were everywhere. One example of the werewolf cases is the story of Gilles Garnier, the hermit of Dôle (Sk. Nur-Ul-Alam). This alleged werewolf was arrested in 1573 after killing children of nine to twelve years old by eating their flesh. Garnier was later sentenced to death by the authorities of the town Dôle in Frenche-Comté province. His story was so famous that it had been made into a folk song.

It can be seen that the story comes from a time in France when people of all classes still believed in the existence of werewolves. Moreover, a German folklorist named Marianne Rumpf points out that the regions of France where folklorists found “The Grandmother’s Tale” being told were the very regions where werewolf trials had once been widespread (Qtd. in Windling).

This finding is related to the detailed undressing scene in the oral version:

When she finished her meal, the bzou said, “Are you tired from your journey, child? Then take off your clothes, come to bed, and I shall warm you up.”

“Where shall I put my apron, Grandmother?”

“Throw it on the fire, child, for you won’t need it anymore.”

“Where shall I put my bodice, Grandmother?”

“Throw it on the fire, for you won’t need it anymore.”

The girl repeats this question for her skirt, her petticoat, and her stockings. The bzou gives the same answer, and she throws each item on the fire.

-The Grandmother’s Tale-

(English-translated version)

Because the antagonist in the story is a werewolf, then the detailed part of opening clothes by the heroine herself is quite normal. It is not an animal who demands it. Instead, it is a man who can change into a wolf. Therefore the long striptease scene, which shows the sexual desires of the antagonist, fits well into the story. If the antagonist has been a wolf, it may be difficult to accept that an animal has a sexual desire for a human.

In short, the story teller did not use ‘bzou’ to add a sense of mystery in the story, nor did he imagine it. The existence bzou in life was a part of his beliefs.
The act of storing some body parts of the grandmother

[The bzou] quickly killed the old woman and gobbled her up, flesh, blood, and bone - except for a bit of flesh that he put in a little dish on the pantry shelf, and except for a bit of blood that he drained into a little bottle. Then the bzou dressed in Grandmother’s cap and shawl and climbed into bed.

-The Grandmother’s Tale
(English-translated version)

Why did the bzou not eat all of the grandmother’s body parts in the first place? Why did he leave some bits behind and store them in the pantry shelf? Actually, this scene has a striking similarity with one of the stories about werewolves which circulated in France during Middle Age. The werewolf was called ‘the tailor’ which was after his profession. Sk. Nur-Ul-Alam has a useful depiction of this account in his website “Werewolves' Cases” (2001):

In his [the tailor] cellars he stored their [children] meat like butchers. Some barrels were used to stack up bones and “other foul and hideous things”.

This similarity shows that this part of “The Grandmother’s Tale” represents the story that was once widespread in the

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French society in Middle Age. It is very possible that the Erzähler had “The Tailor” story in his mind when he was telling “The Grandmother’s Tale” to others since “The Tailor” was the story of his time.

The characters of laundresses

After the girl has realized that the ‘grandmother’ besides her is a bzou, she runs away from the house and later reaches a river which she cannot cross for it is very deep. Yet, she eventually manages to cross the river with the help of several laundresses who are washing clothes across the river at that moment. The bzou also asks for their help to cross the river, but the women intentionally drown him since they know he is up to no good.

This act of helping others is one of the characteristics of rural life. Just like the comment of Verdier in her essay “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge dans la traditional orale” (1978):

This double role of the laundresses — helping the little girl pass on one hand, rescuing her, and drowning the wolf on the other hand, killing him — is consistent with their role in the social reality of village life [...]” (my translation)

Although the laundresses may not know who Little Red Riding Hood is, they still rescue her from being caught by the
wicked bzou. This scene prominently occurs in the villages where people are still helping each other all the time. This shows that the characters of laundresses do not simply emerge from the imagination of the Erzähler. They were parts of his daily life.

The tying of the heroine’s ankle

There is a scene where the bzou ties the heroine’s ankle when she asks for the permission to go to the toilet. The bzou does that in order not to let the girl run away from him. I believe that there is a plausible reason for the story teller to construct this scene. The tying of the ankle is seen to be a symbol of two things: slavery and desire of superiority.

Although it is said that traditional slavery disappeared around the 12th century, another form of slavery emerged in the 14th century. The new form of slavery was based on the difference in religions. Muslims and Pagans were the ones mostly sold as slaves (Wikipedia). Therefore, the practice of slavery was still among the French people at that time. That may be the reason for the story teller to specify the tying on the heroine’s ankle, for slaves were usually tied around their ankles. The second meaning is that the tying shows the men’s desire of being superior towards women. In Middle Age, women were not confined to kitchen or bedrooms. Instead, they had the freedom to do what they wanted (BBC). The tying may symbolize the restrictions that men make for women. It is like a form of reminder to women – not to forget their ‘womanly duties’ in the midst of their freedom. I do not believe that the tying scene is made for nothing but ‘decoration’ to the story. I believe it has some meanings and the meanings give us an insight into the life of rural people.

Professor Waller Hastings from the Northern State University describes folktale as “oral and communal” in his website:

That is, it has developed through repeated oral retellings within society or community, each person who retells it makes his/her own contribution to the story, altering it in some way, and in the process of transmission the tale takes on the character and concerns of its particular community (2003, Defining the Fairy Tales).

In short, it is a reflection of the community. Because of this, we do not expect to find any absurdity in the folktale. Although the oral version of “Little Red Riding Hood” is absurd and barbaric to us, it is actually not for the people who had lived in the French rural area during Middle Age since the ‘absurd’ things were parts of their lives. That may be the reason for the disappearance of this version. Oral tale will fade from
memory if it does not continue to meet community needs (Hastings). In the 17th century, the French became more civilized and the hysteria of witchcraft or werewolves diminished. As a result, Charles Perrault had to do some changes to the story so that it could be accepted by the community — no more cannibalism, werewolves, and others alike. As society becomes more civilized, "The Grandmother's Tale" becomes "The Forgotten Grandmother" [La grand-mère oubliée] — as Vendier called it. The society is changing; therefore the tale must undergo some changes too. That explains why the "Little Red Riding Hood" tale told a long time ago is different from the one told to us now. Time has restructured the tale. Yet, the re-discovery of the oral version reminds us once more how harsh life was in the rural area in France in Middle Age.
References


