Until very recently American children have been carefully sheltered from "the facts of life," specifically from the facts of sexuality and death. ... 

Children's literature is emerging from this conspiracy, reflecting our adult awareness that children are not only capable of coping with sexuality and death, but that they must cope with them if they are to mature. Modern children's books such as Judy Blume's *Then Again, Maybe I Won't* or Virginia Lee's *Magic Moth* reflect this new awareness of our children's capabilities and needs in these two areas.

This new awareness has not yet illuminated the American editions of a children's classic, *Little Red Riding Hood.* Charles Perrault's *Le petit chaperon rouge* is centered on an erotic metaphor and ends tragically; yet neither of these elements of the tale figure in modern translations of the story.

Perrault's tale provides a classic example of the bowdlerizing which all too often afflicts children's literature. Derived from the German version, [the Grimms'] *Rotkäppchen,* ... American versions of the tale have been sanitized to the point where the erotic element disappears and the tragic ending becomes comic. This approach emasculates a powerful story, one which unrevised is a metaphor for the maturing process. It will be suggested, mostly between the lines, that much of the considerable literary value of the tale disappears in the revisions.

*Le petit chaperon rouge* is a brief tale composed of sixty-one lines of prose and a fifteen-line rhymed *Moralité.* The "moral" warns children, especially attractive young girls, against listening to all men ("toutes sortes de gens"). Some of them, seemingly gentle, are actually wolves.

*Le petit chaperon rouge* has been so popular since Perrault wrote it, that some folklorists have felt it must be part of the European oral tradition. Most students of the fairy tale, however, and some of the most eminent scholars of folklore, suggest that the tale originated with Perrault. Be that as it may, Perrault's tale is classic in its simplicity and finality. ...
The tale's brevity makes it clear that Perrault is ... unconcerned with character development or an elaborate plot.
... He establishes his protagonist in two sentences: she is a young village girl, the prettiest ever; her mother and grandmother dote on her; she wears a red cap, or hood, which the loving grandmother has made for her. After this point we learn only three more elements of the little girl's character: she is to make an independent journey away from her mother; she has not learned that it is dangerous to listen or talk to a wolf; and she enjoys hazelnuts, butterflies, and flowers. With these carefully-selected details Perrault sketches the prototypical innocent little girl leaving the home. She is both beautiful and beloved, and customarily inhabits a secure and exclusively female world; she does not fear the Outsider, and she is identified with the natural beauties of nuts, flowers, and butterflies.

Perrault employs his other human characters simply as devices. They establish Little Red Riding Hood's lovable quality and provide the motivation for her journey. They are not otherwise important in the story, except of course as a grandmotherly hors d'oeuvre.

The wolf is the other major character. He is personified menace, and Perrault selects only the details necessary to establish his role in Little Red Riding Hood's world. His simply being a wolf is probably sufficient to support his menace, since wolves are widely slandered in European (and American) tradition. Perrault also introduces him as "compere le Loup" (Wolf, the deceiver) in his initial meeting with Little Red Riding Hood, and adds immediately that he "very much wished to eat" the little girl. The wolf is firmly established as the villain and as the only male in the story; the working-out of the plot is inevitable.

Inevitable and classic. Given an innocent who has not learned to fear wolves, her initial deception is a matter of course, as is her final destruction. All that is necessary is for the two central characters to meet again, in surroundings where the wolf need not fear the intervention of woodcutters. Perrault brings the two together in just such circumstances in the grandmother's home. He then underscores the destructively treacherous nature of the wolf by having him engage in a metaphorical seduction: he tells Little Red Riding Hood to join him in bed and she does so, first disrobing. The stage is set and the major action of the tragedy is set in motion. Perrault brings about the dénouement, and reinforces the essential natures of wolf and little girl in his closing dialogue. This famous antiphon indicates the little girl's innocent wonder at her "grandmother's" size and, at the same time, re-establishes the wolfishness which that size actually manifests. All that is then required, or artistically appropriate, is to end dialogue and tale with: ...

["Grandmother, what big teeth you have!" "TO EAT YOU!" And saying these words, the wicked wolf threw himself on Little Red Riding Hood and ate her.]

The tale's central metaphor and theme seem fairly clear. Perrault saw fit to underline them, nonetheless, in his closing "Moralité": pretty young girls should not listen to "all sorts of men," he warns, lest they be devoured by "le Loup." Obviously, Perrault uses "the Wolf" as a metaphor, if not for "toutes sortes de gens" at any rate for those whom he characterizes as quiet, self-effacing, anxious to please, and "les plus dangereux."

This is not to say, however, that the tale is simply a metaphorical seduction--even though the wolf does indeed lure Little Red Riding Hood out of her clothes and into bed. Perrault wrought better than that, perhaps better than he knew. "Little Red Riding Hood" is the tale of the innocent who leaves home, meets the betrayer, doffs her family gift of warmth and protection (the "chaperon"), and is destroyed. It is in a way the ultimate tragedy, if that is not too grandiose a term for a three-page fairy tale; youth and innocence leave home only to be destroyed guiltless. Something similar happened to Job's children.

Indeed, the basic theme of the tale is akin to that of Job; innocence, beauty, and goodness are destroyed by their opposites. In "Little Red Riding Hood" this theme is embodied in the tale of the child who leaves parent and home in order to engage in an independent action. The child commits no wrong, but the world of the forest deceives and destroys her. It is probably unnecessary to point out that such occurrences are facts of life. The
continued popularity of Perrault's tale in France testifies to children's willing reception of the grim finality of the tale.

That grim finality is almost entirely missing from American versions of the tale. Most of them—even those which attribute the story to Perrault—delete the erotic element, provide a "moral" absent from Perrault's story, and deliver Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother unharmed from the depths of the wolf. In short, most American retellings of the tale transmute it to the version which the brothers Grimm published as Number 26 in their Märchen: "Rotkäppchen."

"Rotkäppchen," ironically, appears to be derived from Perrault's tale rather than from the "oral tradition," as the Grimms believed. The tale suffered major revisions as it crossed the border; since the same revisions appear in most American versions, the important ones are presented here in some detail:

1. The mother's direction to Rotkäppchen in the Grimm story are quite detailed, and moreover provide the inception of the moral of the story: "so geh hübsch sittsam und lauf nicht vom Wege ab" ("walk along nicely and don't leave the path.")(2)2. There are no woodcutters nearby when the wolf meets Rotkäppchen, but he spares her in order to later consume both the child and the grandmother.3. The wolf tempts Rotkäppchen to delay in order to pick flowers and listen to the birds. She leaves the path in order to do so.4. The erotic element vanishes; the wolf conceals himself in the bed, but Rotkäppchen begins her series of "Grandmother what big..." exclamations from alongside it, and the wolf leaps out of it to devour her.5. The tale ends as comedy rather than tragedy. When the wolf has consumed both the grandmother and Rotkäppchen, he returns to the bed, sleeps, and snores. A passing huntsman investigates the loud snoring and surgically rescues the women from the wolf's belly as the wolf sleeps on. They fill the resulting cavity with stones, the weight of which kills the wolf when he awakens and tries to spring up. Everyone is happy; the huntsman takes the wolf's pelt, the grandmother takes the cake and wine, and Rotkäppchen takes the moral, as she tells herself, "Du willst dein Lebtag nicht wieder allein vom Wege ab in den Wald laufen, wenn dir's die Mutter verboten hat" ("Never again in your life will you have a mind to leave the path to go off alone into the forest, when your mother has forbidden it to you").

These revisions "clean up" and reverse the theme of Perrault's tale. In the Grimm tale, the point is that someone will always take care of the child—even if she steps off the path. There will always be someone there, and youth and innocence—having learnt its lesson—will be rescued unchanged, resolved henceforth to mind Mother. The revised tale denies that the child can leave home and find destruction—instead, its point is "Mind your mother."

Perrault's tale, on the other hand, points out that leaving home, becoming independent of the parent, is a risky undertaking. It may result in disaster, not through the child's fault but because that's the way the world is. Its point is, "The wolf awaits."

"The wolf awaits" is not a popular moral among American translators and publishers of Le petit. ... The overwhelming majority of American editions of "Little Red Riding Hood" ... repress the central erotic metaphor and replace the tragic ending with the Grimm's happy ending. This occurs even when the tale is attributed to Perrault. ...

In short, the American publishers of "Little Red Riding Hood" have protected their audience--our children--from the sexuality and violent death which Perrault built into his tale. They have revised away sex and death from a story which is a metaphoric rendering of the maturation process; they have denied the maturing process. Their heroine is rescued by an obvious father figure, and she resolves never again to "step off the path" to disobey the mother. Her independent action is portrayed as an aberration which automatically receives punishment. Independence is bad. Dependence is good. Remain a child.

Perrault's tale does not urge the child to remain immature, nor does it urge the opposite. His tale takes it for granted that a child will mature, that it will leave the home and the parent to engage in an independent task. But
Perrault's tale points out that maturing is risky; there are dangers in the forest--if the maturing person makes a misstep (not necessarily through any personal fault), then he or she may perish. It's unjust, of course--as Job pointed out long ago, yet it is a fact. It is an important fact for those who plan to grow up; we do our children a disservice by protecting them from it. We also provide them with an inferior literary experience. The shocking ending, the injustice of Perrault's tale hits home; it prompts us to think further about the story we have just read. The Grimm tale, on the other hand, has no such impact. We can relax as we finish it; disaster has been averted, huntsmen will always providentially pass by, and Little Red Riding Hood will not step off the path again.

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