

7-1-1969

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### Recommended Citation

Foley, L. (1969). Little Red Riding-Hood. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 9 (4). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol9/iss4/2](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol9/iss4/2)

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# LITTLE RED RIDING-HOOD

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The fairy-tales which are most deeply embedded in our "English" literary tradition are the handful that came by translation from French at the beginning of the eighteenth century. They were included in a little volume published in Paris in 1697 under the title, *Histoires et Contes du Temps Passé*. Not yet at that time had the French language firmly adopted the *p* (never pronounced) of the modern form *temps* (time), added to mark its derivation from Latin *tempus*. It is like the *b* in our *debt* and *doubt*, alluding to Latin *debitum* and *dubitare*, inserted by scholars centuries after the words had come into English respectively from French *dette* and *doute*, or the silent *l* in *salmon*, from French *saumon*, as a reminder of Latin *salmo*.

The sub-title, "Contes de ma mère l'Oie," was the real beginning of Mother Goose, though it may not have been what really settled the name in our tradition, for it appears that there was a Mrs. Goose, mother-in-law of Thomas Fleet who published "Mother Goose Melodies" in London in 1719. This may have been only a coincidental reinforcement of something that was already started. As sub-title for the original *Histoires et Contes* (stories and tales) the phrase seems to imply a modestly deprecating attitude, a suggestion that these stories were not to be taken too seriously.

When this little book was published, its author, Charles Perrault, was 69 years old. A member of the French Academy, he was one of the most distinguished gentlemen in France. His long poem, *Le Siècle de Louis le Grand*, had started the literary quarrel between the ancients and the moderns known as "the battle of the books." He was for the moderns. He had retired to his castle and was devoting himself to writing his *Mémoires* and a long poem on "Adam, or the Creation of Man." From his point of view, the small book of *Contes* must have been a slight by-play. Though he was generally known as the author, he published it under the name of his young son, who could not possibly have produced it. We can be sure that he never bothered to read the proof, for there are glaring typographical errors. Yet it must have been partly intended for the edification of his own children, to judge from the *moralités* which are regularly omitted in English translations.

At the time when this collection appeared, a vogue of fairy-stories was at its height at the Court of Versailles. It was not destined to last much longer, and these are virtually the only examples anyone

remembers nowadays. This unpretentious volume had an immediate success and was soon reprinted in numerous editions which circulated all over Europe and beyond. Shortly after 1700, it was translated into English by a certain Guy Miège, a little-known Swiss who made an obscure living in London as a private teacher of French. As a linguistic performance his translation was nothing wonderful, and subsequent efforts have not greatly improved upon it, but at least he apparently had the wit to recognize something that would not fail to make a permanent place for itself.

Undoubtedly the best-known story in the collection (though most distorted and least understood) is that of "Cinderella." Essentially the background of that tale has the atmosphere of the royal court at Versailles where Perrault was perfectly at home. His descriptions of costumes and *décor* correspond to the most reliable historical evidence that we have for that period. The "fairy" element, not basically essential to the story, seems mostly a concession to the taste of the time. Other stories in the volume, however, are very different in their flavor. "Sleeping Beauty," which he called *La Belle au Bois Dormant* (the beautiful lady in the sleeping forest), has a kind of timeless other-world charm. In the one which must be next-best-known after "Cinderella," *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*, "Little Red Riding-Hood," the atmosphere is clearly medieval.

Because it is familiar to everybody from childhood, no one thinks about the quaint translation "*riding-hood*." There is not the slightest indication that the girl ever rode horseback; she walked. *Chaperon* meant a short cape which protected the neck and shoulders, and included a hood which could be pushed back when not needed, like that of a conventional monk's habit. It was a kind of garment commonly worn by both sexes during the Middle Ages. An article of clothing developed in later times which *was* specifically designed for riding was the form of coat which survives in our day in evening dress, with "tails" which would fall on each side of the saddle instead of rumpling up behind. The French name for it, *redingote*, came from English "*riding-coat*." But this of course had nothing to do with *Petit Chaperon Rouge*.

Like the other tales in Perrault's collection, the story begins in the classic manner: "Il était une fois . . ." "Once upon a time there was . . ." It is a masterpiece of sobriety of style; not a word is wasted. It has the living quality of oral narration. There are the old-fashioned expressions a grandmother might use in telling to a child a story that had passed down through generations by word of mouth, the way

traditional folklore was preserved and carried on. Yet there is real art in the creation of vivid scenes with the utmost economy of means. The build-up to a climax in the remarks back and forth between the little girl and the disguised wolf is the sort of pattern on which the most memorable of the old ballads were constructed and which has much to do with their being so unforgettable.

A remark made in the story apparently launched what was to become a proverbial expression. The grandmother's answer, telling how to open the door, was: "Tire la chevillette, la bobinette cherra." We might translate it, "pull the pin, and the latch will fall." Having heard her say it, the wolf repeats it when the granddaughter arrives. Though by no means often heard nowadays, it could be used figuratively to express the inevitable result of a certain action, or perhaps to say that you have only to do the simple right thing to get what you want.

In the background, of course, there is the heritage of medieval legendary lore of animals which combine the characteristic traits of their species with canny human wisdom and complete possession of language. Every creature had his place in the scheme of things in the traditional folk-tales of the Middle Ages, though some were more interesting than others. Particularly outstanding were the cock and the fox. In all sorts of imagined circumstances we see the various creatures engaged in a recurring battle of wits in which the triumph of the more astute illustrates the old French proverb, *Mieux vaut engin que force*, ingenuity is worth more than brute strength. The final flowering of all such legendary lore appears in the matchless *Fables* of Lafontaine, who like Perrault was a member of the French Academy in the seventeenth century. The delightful originality and exquisite grace of these "fables" make them a timeless achievement of literary art.

A few years ago, a quip was going the rounds: "Little Red Riding-Hood had it easy; she only had to deal with one wolf in the forest, not one on every street-corner." Now really, apart from the flippancy of tone, this implies the same figurative meaning of "wolf" which appears in Perrault's *moralité* following the end of the story. In very neat verse he advises children, and especially beautiful and well-brought-up girls, not to listen to all sorts of people. Not all "wolves," he says, are of the same sort, and some might not be recognized as such. There are some who seeming courteous and gentle follow young ladies into houses and into private alcoves; these are the most dangerous of all.

Not many literary works of several centuries ago are so well known to everyone that allusions to them are instantly recognizable and the point is immediately understood. Again and again, with both serious and humorous intent, without any mention of the name, Little Red Riding-Hood and the wolf have been used in cartoons to present symbolically a variety of situations, including relations with Russia and Vietnam. An example in lighter vein showed the wolf driving a car and stopping beside the girl carrying her basket. He looks rather nonplussed, while she is smiling with a slightly mocking air. Underneath the picture we read: "Grandma moved. She's spending her sunset years in the senior city at Brentwood interchange on 195."<sup>1</sup>

In another humorous scene the grandmother is pictured in a modern-looking setting, standing in the doorway to welcome the little girl approaching with the basket on her arm. She greets the child with the news: "Wow, dearie, did you miss the action! A wolf was bugging me, so I gave him a shot of Mace, karated him, and called the fuzz."<sup>2</sup>

As a final demonstration of the story's universal familiarity, we may notice its employment to bring out an interesting truth connected with phonetics. Without its being so well known, the experiment could hardly work at all. Here we have a collection of words, each a genuine word in itself, which taken literally make no sense whatever and do not add up to any intelligible meaning. Yet if one reads them aloud, pronouncing each word as it is but rapidly and with the right grouping and intonation, no one who listens could fail to recognize the story at every point. This cannot be done, however, without considerable practice.

#### LADLE RAT ROTTEN HUT

(Hairs annulled furry starry, toiling udder warts,  
warts welcher alter girdle deferent firmer once inner  
regional virgin.)

Wants pawn term, dare worsted ladle gull hoe lift wetter murder  
inner ladle cordage honor itch offer lodge dock florist. Disc ladle gull  
orphan worry ladle cluck wetter putty ladle rat hut, end fur disc  
raison pimple caulder ladle rat rotten hut. Wan moaning rat rotten  
hut's murder colder inset: "Ladle rat rotten hut, heresy ladle basking  
winsome burden barter and shirker cockles. Tick disc ladle basking

1. *New York Times Book Review*, May 14, 1967.

2. *The New Yorker*, September 14, 1968, p. 129.

tudor cordage offer groin murder hoe lifts honor udder site offer florist. Shaker lake, dun stopper laundry wrote, end yonder nor sorghum stenchs dun stopper torque wet strainers.”

“Hoe-cake, murder,” resplendent ladle rat rotten hut, end tickle ladle basking an stuttered oft. Honor wrote tudor cordage offer groin murder, ladle rat rotten hut mitten anomalous woof.

“Wail, wail, wail,” set disc wicket woof, “evanescent ladle rat rotten hut! Wares or putty ladle gull goring wizard ladle basking?”

“Armor goring tumor groin murder’s reprisal ladle gull. “Grammars seeking bet. Armor ticking arson burden barter end shirker cockles.”

“O hoe! Heifer blessing woke,” setter wicket woof, butter taught tomb shelf, “Oil tickle shirt court tudor cordage offer groin murder. Oil ketchup wetter letter, and den—O bore!”

Soda wicket woof tucker shirt court, end whinney retched a cordage offer groin murder, picket inner widow an sore debtor pore oil worming worse lion inner bet. Inner flesh disc abdominal woof lipped honor betting adder rope. Zany pool dawn a groin murder’s nut cup an gnat gun, any curdle dope inner bet.

Inner ladle wile ladle rat rotten hut a raft attar cordage an ranker dough ball. “Comb ink, sweat hard,” setter wicket woof, disgracing is verse. Ladle rat rotten hut entity bet rum end stud buyer groin murder’s bet. “Oh grammar,” crater ladle gull, “Wart bag icer gut! A nervous sausage bag ice!” “Buttered lucky chew whiff, doling,” whiskered disc ratchet woof, wetter wicket small. “Oh grammar, water bag noise! A nervous sore suture anomalous prognosis!” “Buttered small your whiff,” inserter woof, ants mouse worse waddling. “Oh grammar, water bag mousey gut! A nervous sore suture bag mouse!”

Daze worry on forger nut gull’s lest warts. Oil offer sodden throne offer carvers an sprinkling otter bet, disc curl an bloat Thursday woof ceased pore ladle rat rotten hut an garbled erupt.

Mural: Yonder nor sorghum stenchs shut ladle gulls stopper torque wet strainers.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Published without known authorship, *WORD STUDY*, May 1953.