

Disobedient Women: Holly Wheeler as a Fairy Tale Protagonist

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Introduction

As a horror show, *Stranger Things* (2016-2026) evokes images of monsters, blood, and gore, rather than fairy tale motifs. Nevertheless, in its fifth season, the show echoes several fairy tales. Holly Wheeler (played by Nell Fisher) is kidnapped by Henry Creel (Jamie Campbell Bower), who imprisons her in his mindscape. At first glance, his house is a wonderland where Holly can do as she pleases, with only one rule: she must not stray into the forest, for it is allegedly full of monsters. This prohibition calls to mind the story of “Bluebeard,” a serial killer of women whose last wife discovers his bloody chamber after being given the key to it, along with the order not to open it. Holly is lured into the forest by Maxine “Max” Mayfield (Sadie Sink) and thus traipses through the woods, akin to her fairy tale predecessor, Little Red Riding Hood.

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Both “Bluebeard” and “Little Red Riding Hood” were first recorded in Charles Perrault’s 1697 collection *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*. The colored symbols that characterize them the blue beard and the red cape are likely Perrault’s own invention, signifying his immeasurable influence in shaping these tales (Ruddick 346; Orenstein 36). Nevertheless, his are not the only significant versions. The Brothers Grimm published their collection *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1812. They expanded the “Little Red Riding Hood” storyline and granted her a happy ending after she learns to be obedient. Another important tale is “The Story about the Grandmother,” an oral French version of the story in which a werewolf eats the grandmother, but the girl outwits him and saves herself (reprinted in Delarue 13–20). Similarly, there are other versions of “Bluebeard,” such as “Mr. Fox” (first published by Joseph Jacobs, 1890) or “The Robber Bridegroom,” (Brothers Grimm, 1812) in which female characters work toward their own rescue.

Likewise, contemporary renditions of fairy tales often rewrite the narratives to be more empowering. The same trend of strong female characters is observable in speculative fiction in general. *Stranger Things*’s Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown), Joyce (Winona Ryder), Max, Nancy (Natalia Dyer), Erica (Priah Ferguson), Suzie (Gabriella Pizzolo), Karen (Cara Buono), and, most recently, Holly: all resonate with the theme of female strength. Holly, first introduced as a toddler (played by Anniston and Tinsley Price in seasons one through four), becomes a significant character in the final season. This paper analyzes how the fairy tale motifs construct her identity as a strong, disobedient girl freed from the patriarchal structures usually promoted through fairy tales. To that end, the paper contextualizes the treatment of female characters in fairy tales and in contemporary speculative fiction, delineating the

progression from obedience to unruliness. It then explains Holly Wheeler's intertextual connections, specifically elaborating upon the motifs from "Bluebeard" and "Little Red Riding Hood" to show how she differs from the stereotypical female fairy tale character. Finally, having recognized the importance of community, the paper also deals with Max as her mentor and with the strengthening bonds of her community at large.

Socialization and Obedience: Unruly Heroines in Fairy Tales and Contemporary Speculative Fiction

The purpose of fairy tales has long been the socialization of the audience. Fairy tales have been used to teach ever since the eighteenth century, when "educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manners so that children and adults would become civilized according to the social code of that time" (Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* [Subversion] 3). They "present a picture of sexual roles, behavior, and psychology" (Lieberman 384). In punishing bad behaviors and rewarding good acts and values, fairy tales instill certain values into the audiences. Boys grow up listening and reading about "strength, courage, wisdom, loyalty," while girls are taught about "modesty, industriousness, humility, honesty, diligence, and virginity" (Zipes, *Subversion* 150). Fairy tale heroes are allowed to wander "into the world to seek their fortunes, create their wealth, possess their women," whereas heroines often merely wait (for the true love's kiss) instead of being proactive (Duncker 231). Moreover, the female role in fairy tales is often limited to being the hero's prize (Propp 35), while their only value is their physical beauty (Lieberman 386). Essentially, women are discursively taught to accept patriarchal

values that figure them as subservient, passive, and obedient objects. Culturally, male disobedience is termed “revolutionary and courageous; but woman’s disobedience, forever colored by traditional interpretations of the first biblical instance of it [Eve’s], is seldom admired” (Renfroe 91).

Conversely, in a 1970 article, Alison Lurie asserts that there are many fairy tales and folk tales that promote female strength and resourcefulness, set in “a society in which women are as competent and active as men, at every age and in every class.” () Indeed, folk tales and lesser known fairy tales brim with active, strong female protagonists. As Valerie Estelle Frankel notes, “clever, creative heroines are not simply modern products of a growing female awareness they have always existed, as far back as the ancient Great Goddesses who battled the darkness” (3). Female storytellers spun “teaching tales about girls who rescued themselves” while going through a rite of passage that initiates them into adulthood and maturity (Frankel 7). Yet the male-controlled compiling and publishing of these stories has marginalized women (Ragan 237). As has been said, fairy tales were collected and edited, usually by men and in accordance with the desired values and social codes. For example, the Brothers Grimm collected stories from German peasantry, ostensibly to capture the essence of the German nation, but edited them for publication whilst seeking “to link the beliefs and behavior of characters in the folktales to the cultivation of bourgeois norms” (Zipes, *Subversion* 61). The editing process has thus diminished the value of female agency. Importantly, the existence of miscellaneous active heroines does not compensate for the prevalence of the obedient ones. As Marcia R. Lieberman writes, the unknown heroines are “beside the point. Only the best known stories, those that

everyone has read or heard . . . have affected masses of children in our culture” (383-4).

To address this lack, contemporary fairy tale adaptations often imbue their female characters with depth, making them complex, strong, and active characters. The “Bluebeard” narrative has been famously re-interpreted by Angela Carter in “The Bloody Chamber” (1979), Margaret Atwood in *Bluebeard’s Egg* (1983) and *The Robber Bride* (1993), and in a 1993 Oscar-winning movie *The Piano*, directed by Jane Campion. Some examples of “Little Red Riding Hood” adaptations with active heroines include Carter’s “The Werewolf” (1979), Marissa Meyer’s *Scarlet* (2013), and Elana K. Arnold’s *Red Hood* (2020). This fits into the broader literary trends. Namely, although strong female heroines have existed in myth and literature for a long time, as has been pointed out above, contemporary speculative fiction has seen a boom in female heroines. This is a “product of feminist interventions” (Driscoll and Grealy 11). One of these heroines is Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* (2008). For her, rebellion is at the core of her identity and subjectivity (Green-Barteet 48). Her whole narrative arc relies on her revolting against the oppressors instead of blindly following the orders of the Panem government and even the orders of her allies. However, Katniss can trace her origins further back. One of the key figures in female-led speculative fiction, a previously strictly male genre, is Meg Murry from Madeline L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962). According to Deborah Lindsay Williams, Meg is “an awkward and unlovely girl who adores math and science, and the novel does not follow a Cinderella-style narrative of transformation: Meg is as prickly and argumentative at the end of the novel as she is at the beginning. She does not bloom into a docile beauty” (232). In fact, it is her perceived faults impatience, anger,

argumentativeness that help her defeat the villain. Her mentor, Mrs. Whatsit, explicitly tells her: “Stay angry, Little Meg . . . You will need all your anger now” (L’Engle 119). Twisting the narrative of an obedient and passive heroine, her faults are figured as positive and even necessary. After all, in Janet Brennan Croft’s words, “[l]earning when, how, and why to disobey . . . is an important lesson” (63). Meg has thus paved the way for future “equally unconventional heroines” (Williams 232).

Another character that emerges as the paradigm of a strong female character in speculative fiction is Buffy the Vampire Slayer, that unequivocal icon of female power. The show (1997-2003) often reverses or complicates gender roles and casts her as a leader and a savior (Symonds 2). The series encourages the audience to, like Buffy (Sarah Michelle Geller), seize control over their own destinies and to resist oppressive structures (Clark and Miller 8-9). As a horror series, *Buffy* also aligns with the contemporary trend of featuring strong heroines in horror who do not need to be saved but instead face the villains and deal the death blow (Wirth 24; Clover 35). In this fight, the titular character is not alone: *Buffy* promotes “sisterhood as the basis for both individual and social change,” building a community of strong women (Rowe Karlyn 124). Furthermore, reflecting the trends of re-imagined fairy tales, *Buffy* uses fairy tale motifs, but underlines that “[w]hile interactions with these [fairy tale] monsters often aid in Buffy’s growth and development,” they are also very real within the diegetic reality of the show, not mere metaphors for the socialization and maturation processes (Skwire 204). This is very effectively shown in one of the episodes where Buffy appears as Little Red Riding Hood: “Helpless,” 3.12. In this episode, Buffy, nearly eighteen years old, is tested by the

Watchers to confirm her status as a Slayer. Her test consists of killing a vampire while her powers are suppressed. Throughout the episode, Buffy wears a red coat, and the vampire quotes “Little Red Riding Hood” to taunt her (e.g. “Helpless,” 3.12, 35:48). Evidently, *Buffy* uses fairy tale motifs to construct and develop its strong female protagonist.

With *Stranger Things* also being a horror show, it is useful to briefly examine how this genre treats its strong, unruly characters. Much like fairy tales, horror fiction can be understood as morality tales, wherein the (child) audience is taught lessons and desired values (Groom). Moreover, as T. S. Kord writes, horror can serve a similar function as fairy tales in enabling children to work through their fears, difficult emotions, and complex situations (4-5). In terms of the values propagated, *Stranger Things* is rooted in the 1980s, specifically marked by Ronald Reagan’s new Right “built on the foundations of the nuclear family, [which] upheld staunchly conservative values linking femininity with domesticity and masculinity with aggression” (Butler 74). The series acknowledges this but highlights the importance of the characters going against the traditional roles and becoming “three-dimensional young adults” (Butler 78). Across the five seasons, it is the “[r]ebellious children who break free from the stereotypical role of child victim [that] are the ones who find ways to survive their encounters with Hawkins’s monsters” (Scott 25), by sneaking out of homes, standing up to authority figures, and so on. Even if the show started as a narrative centering on a rebellious group of boys and older male characters, with female characters serving as plot devices integrated “into narratives about masculine development,” and the supporting cast may seem tokenistic (Erica and Suzie representing female “nerds,” for example), the show is nuanced

in developing characters such as Eleven and Nancy (Driscoll and Grealy 9-11). Nancy “actively defies the traditional notions of femininity, domesticity and chastity that were espoused by Reagan” (Butler 80). She grows from a stereotypical goodie-two-shoes into a rifle-wielding action heroine. For her part, Eleven has been upturning the passive, obedient damsel-in-distress narrative from the very start, continually saving the boys instead of being the one who waits to be saved (Clemens-Smucker 66). Even Holly Wheeler in the early seasons, a mere toddler then, is represented as an active subject (Scott 28), someone whom Joyce asks for confirmation about the appearance of the supernatural (“Chapter Three: Holly, Jolly” 1.3, 28:55). In the final season, Holly develops into one of the central characters and her growth is intertextually marked by fairy tales and other cultural phenomena.

Holly Wheeler: Disobedient Intertextual Identities

Intertextuality is a term that “names a text’s relations to other texts in the larger ‘mosaic’ of cultural practices and their expression” (Orr 641). For fairy tales, it is especially relevant. The versions of the tales that we know today are composites of “all sorts of bits of other stories long ago and far away” (Carter, Introduction x). Having noted these amalgamations of motifs and storylines, Cristina Bacchilega has developed the concept of “the fairy-tale web” to describe how intertextuality contributes to the meaning of fairy tales, as “specific links historical, cultural, generic, figurative, ideological [are] activated by necessarily selective texts within the extended web” (*Fairy Tales Transformed?* 20).

This paper understands “Bluebeard” as Holly’s matrix tale, the tale-type in which she is embedded and that is expanded by intertextual references to other works. According

to Lovell-Smith, “Bluebeard” tales, both folk and literary ones, are characterized by intertextuality, with cross-references that represent “artistic, purposeful, meaningful choice[s]” (“Feminism and Bluebeard” 51). In *Stranger Things*, the “Bluebeard” narrative has been largely expanded by references to “Little Red Riding Hood,” but also to *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the Boy Scouts of America, and the already mentioned *A Wrinkle in Time*.

D&D has been an integral part of *Stranger Things* since the opening scenes of the show. Throughout the series, “the Duffer brothers offer a vision of *D&D* as a useful game and a way of seeing and interpreting” (Wetmore 62). The characters conceptualize the monsters and villains through game terminology and use their in-game characters to identify themselves. For Holly, this process starts when Mike (Finn Wolfhard) gifts her the figurine of Holly the Heroic (“Chapter One: The Crawl” 5.1, 39:58). Her identification with the character is visible in the costume she puts on in Henry’s mindscape.

The show has already played around with costuming and used it to create character identities. For instance, in the first season, Eleven’s stereotypically “girly” costume she puts on to fit in and appear nonthreatening ends up being at odds with her immense and violent powers, thereby upsetting gender stereotypes. Instead of being worn just for utility, clothing “becomes costume, in which as in theater and religious ritual, the individual is subsumed by a role” (Kaiser 32). Clothing can also be used in rites of passage, to signify initiation into adulthood (Frankel 37). In *Stranger Things*, Holly does use clothes to construct her identity. She chooses a blue dress with white details that echoes not only her figurine, but also Lewis Carroll’s Alice as popularized by Disney’s 1951 animated

adaptation of this classic. This connection contributes to the understanding of Holly's storyline. At the beginning of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), the child protagonist holds propriety in high esteem, not wanting to seem ignorant or uncertain. To that end, she "looks toward rules to preserve her from threat" (Gabriele 370). However, the nonsensical rules of Wonderland force Alice to re-examine the value of obedience (Root 19-20). For Alice, uprooted from everything that she has known so far, Wonderland is a platform for making sense of her own identity at the cusp of adolescence (Flegar and Wertag 221-4). This matches Holly's journey, both literally and metaphorically: she is forced to traverse a strange land and to abandon blind obedience in favor of standing up for herself. An added layer of metatextuality, or self-referential connection, is present in *Stranger Things*: Holly's blue attire calls back to the outfit worn by Henry's sister named, interestingly, Alice (Livi Burch) when she first enters their new house and proclaims that "it looks like a fairy tale" ("Chapter Four: Dear Billy" 4.4, 51:32). Holly's link to fairy tale discourse is thus further strengthened. In terms of fairy tale references, Holly's cape is also deeply significant, but we will give it its due later in this paper as part of the discussion of "Little Red Riding Hood." For now, we'll move on to the final instance of intertextuality based on clothing.

Namely, Holly completes her costume with Henry's old Boy Scout kerchief and bolo tie, providing another intertextual link. It is important to note that the Boy Scouts of America put an "emphasis on self-discipline," not necessarily strictly abiding by rules but "disciplining themselves to keep to the 'straight and narrow,'" as they swear in their oath (Arneil 55). Additionally, an active engagement in the Boy Scouts has been found to "contribute to the formation of social capital and the

development of stronger communities” (Polson et al. 772). The Boy Scouts are, then, an organization for initiation and socialization, combining self-discipline with integration into and contribution to society. However, in the 1980s, when *Stranger Things* takes place, the organization turned to the Right, centering on values that did not agree with the social changes of the time (rise of atheism and homosexuality); they promoted “a narrow and unchanging conception of masculinity, Christianity, and patriotism” (Arneil 59). Holly’s partial uniform challenges these traditional values and leans towards the first image of the Boy Scouts: she is transgressing gender roles by cross-dressing; she is also making her own judgements, and, with that, her own way in life. This is manifested through her wearing the uniform even after she is disillusioned with Henry. Namely, she turns the uniform that he was wearing when he committed his first murder into a symbol of her own strength, standing up to and abandoning the negative connotations it had for Henry.

Holly’s identity is therefore related to these cultural products, practices, and literary characters. On top of Alice, she also calls to mind Meg Murry from her favorite novel. As an unruly heroine herself, Meg serves as her role model. Yet most of all, Holly’s storyline resembles the tales of “Bluebeard” and “Little Red Riding Hood.”

Holly as a “Bluebeard” Heroine

“Bluebeard” is a tale explicitly painting women in a negative light. The titular character is a “man against nature” whose appearance is frightful due to the unnatural color of his beard (Warner 242). Yet Bluebeard’s riches persuade the heroine to marry him—they are enough to make her “think that their host’s beard was not as blue as it had been” (Perrault,

“Bluebeard” 104). The female character is therefore presented as greedy, and Bluebeard lets her enjoy all of his estate and possession, with a caveat: “You may open everything and go everywhere, except for this private room, where I forbid you to go; and I forbid it to you so absolutely that, if you did happen to go into it, there is no knowing what I might do, so angry would I be” (Perrault, “Bluebeard” 106). After that, he leaves for a business trip. At first, the story “swings the listener or reader’s sympathies towards the husband who instructs his young wife, and presents his request for her obedience as reasonable,” while the punishment for her transgression seems just (Warner 243). Bluebeard gives the key to test his bride’s trustworthiness. Of course, the discovery of dead bodies reveals that the heroine is right not to trust him. As Ruddick argues, he already knows she will break her promise, and the key is given *because* he “wants her to transgress” so that he can find pleasure in killing her (Ruddick 348). The bride’s crime is premeditated by her husband. Wanting to tempt his wife into recklessness and disobedience, Bluebeard encourages her to make merry with her friends (Barzilai 19). In other words, his role is double: he is “the patriarch whose orders must be obeyed on the one hand, and on the other [hand] the serpent who seduces by exciting curiosity and desire and so brings death” (Warner 246). His plan is successful: “So keen was her curiosity that, without reflecting how rude it was to leave her guests, she went down by a little secret staircase” to the private chamber (Perrault, “Bluebeard” 106).

Upon unlocking the chamber, the heroine finds the corpses of Bluebeard’s past wives; in shock, she drops the key and irreversibly soils it. The interpretation of the heroine’s entry into the chamber is varied. For some authors, the “central motif of the story is the broken taboo, the forbidden chamber

motif” (Lokke 8). For Laura Mulvey, Bluebeard’s wife’s curiosity is akin to Pandora’s, and the bloody chamber that the transgressive heroine opens contains the secrets of femininity (64, 66). Similarly, in Ruddick’s view, what the wife discovers is not the “forbidden” knowledge, but the “common” one, as she “has yielded to her human curiosity about sex” (348). Despite these positive interpretations of the bloody chamber as a necessary part of the female rite of passage, the bloodied key can be a sign of “marital infidelity” and loss of virginity (Tatar 111), interpreted negatively in a patriarchal (diegetic) reality. Narratively, the key gives away the heroine’s secret and condemns her to death. Before execution, the heroine pleads for mercy: “She threw herself at her husband’s feet, weeping and pleading to be forgiven, and all her actions showed how truly she repented being so disobedient” (Perrault, “Bluebeard” 109). The motif of disobedience comes to the fore. Despite Bluebeard being a serial killer, the wife is the one “commonly perceived as the offender” (Barzilai 7). This is underlined in Perrault’s first moral:

Curiosity’s all very well in its way,
But satisfy it and you risk much remorse,
Examples of which can be seen every day.
The feminine sex will deny it, of course,
But the pleasure you wanted, once taken, is lost,
And the knowledge you looked for is not worth the
cost. (“Bluebeard” 113)

Here, women’s curiosity is firmly rebuked. Perrault appends another moral, in Patricia Duncker’s words, out of embarrassment (231). In the second moral, he says that “The modern husband does not ask / His wife to undertake a task /

Impossible for her to do” (Perrault, “Bluebeard” 114). Yet this moral cheekily proclaims that, because of the meekness of husbands, “It isn’t easy to decide / Which is the master in the house” (Perrault, “Bluebeard” 114). Although the second poem gives women more rights, the light in which this is represented is negative. Therefore, “Perrault’s two morals still uphold absolute patriarchy as a ‘paradise,’ lost when women’s curiosity opened the door to the bloody chamber” (Bacchilega, *Postmodern* 105).

In Perrault’s version, the heroine is saved by her brothers, who rush to her rescue on horseback and slay the villain. She is also accompanied by her sister, Anne, who serves as a lookout and urges the brothers to hurry. Despite the happy ending, the story “explicitly warns its readers against the dangers of female curiosity, suggesting that, to some extent, Bluebeard’s brides have been justly punished for their disobedience” (Sweeney 148). It also casts the heroine as a helpless damsel in distress. However, variants of the tale “The Castle of Murder,” “Mr. Fox,” “The Robber Bridegroom,” for example often “emphasize women’s wit, women’s art, and women’s storytelling as a means to escape violence and oppression” (Sweeney 150). These iterations of the story instruct “women to trust their instincts about prospective husbands, to learn as much as possible about them before marriage, to take care not to be blinded by their own desire for matrimony” (Ruddick 246).

The storyline of *Stranger Things* aligns Holly with “Bluebeard” motifs. Henry both deceives Holly and tempts her with the luxuries of his mindscape. As has been said, Bluebeard is “inevitably presented as Other, belonging to a different class, land, or world altogether” (Bacchilega, *Postmodern* 109). Yet when Vecna appears to Holly, he does so in the form of Henry Creel, not as a monster. Whereas the blue beard of Perrault’s

antagonist serves as a visual marker of his difference and danger he represents and that the heroine “will deliberately ignore” (Ruddick 348), Henry appears as a friendly gentleman.¹ Holly is thus totally deceived.

Having trapped her in his childhood home, Henry indulges her with a luxurious breakfast, her favorite fruit, and a cassette boombox with a Tiffany tape. Most appealing of all, he informs her that she will have the whole house to herself. “The whole house?” she exclaims. He only asks one thing: “I need you to promise me one thing. . . . You must never, under any circumstance, go out into the woods. Do you understand?” The monsters will not find her, he assures her, “as long as you don’t try to find them.” It is Holly herself who finishes the latter line. Satisfied with her obedience, Henry says he is glad he “saved” her first, as she is “the brightest of them all” (“Chapter Three: The Turnbow Trap” 5.3, 06:48-09:30). This is the clearest connection between Holly’s storyline and “Bluebeard.” Henry gives her an explicit warning against curiosity and exploration. Instead of the bloody chamber, the forbidden place is the forest. However, Henry believes that Holly will obey and he does not test her. There is no key to be bloodied or any other signifier of her disobedience. Henry relies on emotional manipulation: by praising her intelligence, he encourages obedience.

Moreover, he provides enough entertainment to keep her occupied in the house. In fact, Henry keeps her obedient, in the house, via *allowing* her to be a disobedient child. In “Bluebeard,” the husband’s instructions give her free reign of his whole estate: “He told her to make sure that she enjoyed herself properly while he was away, to invite her friends to stay, and to take them out into the country if she wanted to, and not to stint herself wherever she was” (Perrault, “Bluebeard” 104-

6).² In *Stranger Things*, Holly's frolicking is limited to the house, where she is free to do whatever she wants. She bakes an indulgent chocolate cake and eats it slathered with whipped cream, in front of the TV while watching a violent show. She is free to consume unwholesome food, that which "transgresses notions about suitable foods for children in terms of quality and quantity" (Daniel 56). The show she watches is probably not something her parents would usually allow. She also dances around the house and tries on a plethora of dresses. Tiffany's cover of "I Think We're Alone Now" plays in the background of the montage. Significantly, the song opens with the lines: "Children, behave / That's what they say when we're together" ("Chapter Three: The Turnbow Trap" 5.3, 19:58-20:32). The scene makes clever use of the background song about a couple finally left to their own devices. Like them, Holly is left alone and there is no one to admonish her to behave. In the fairy tale, the heroine "is consumed by curiosity, succumbs to temptations, and enters the forbidden chamber" after "[c]onstantly entertaining friends and finally running out of diversions" (Renfroe 84). For Holly, the combination of sweets, dancing, and dresses is enough to compel her to stay in the house.

What finally makes her exit is Max's deception. Posing as Henry, Max sends Holly a letter pleading for help. Despite Henry's warning about the monsters, Holly braves the woods. Fittingly, in "Bluebeard," it is "[b]ravery, not simply curiosity, [that] lead[s] her to unlock the forbidden chamber" (Bacchilega, *Postmodern* 110). Here, female curiosity is not "tainted with evil" (Tatar 111). In line with other "Bluebeard" tales, the "'vice' of female curiosity proves to be crucial for the heroine's survival" (Hempen 45). Holly must learn about Henry to save herself and the other children. Consequently, she must disobey his orders

to stay out of the woods. Like other feminist adaptations, Holly's storyline "is portrayed as a necessary and bold initiation into self- and worldly knowledge rather than as an act of foolish disobedience" (Renfro 83). As Bacchilega elaborates, the heroine of "Bluebeard" must gain knowledge of herself, her husband, and the world. The test that she needs to pass is not her husband's, but the question of whether she can gain this knowledge and then apply it to avoid death (*Postmodern* 107). In other words, "she must be clever to see him not as the Law but as the enemy" (Bacchilega, *Postmodern* 110).

In line with this, Holly has gained knowledge of Henry's true nature and she is able to start resisting him. He traps her again and manipulates the other children to help him. He underlines how disobedient she has been: "I've tried everything, but she won't listen" ("Chapter Seven: The Bridge" 5.7, 30:29). The children turn against her and, realizing that she currently has no allies, she pretends to repent her own disobedience to buy herself time: "I knew not to go into the woods. But I... I went there anyway, and... And I just... I just feel so... so stupid" ("Chapter Seven: The Bridge" 5.7, 38:19-31). Immediately after, she tries to escape. Although she fails because she is outnumbered, this shows that Holly's process of initiation has brought her insight and resourcefulness.

Holly is not "Perrault's passive, lachrymose bride who must be rescued by her brothers" (Ruddick 347). In other "Bluebeard" tales, "in most cases, the girl does not passively rely on chance for rescue. She initiates her own rescue by sending an animal helper back to her family, or she plans and executes her own deliverance" (Bacchilega, *Postmodern* 110). Henry chooses children as his victims "because they are weak. Weak in body and mind. . . . Easily broken. Easily reshaped. Controlled" ("Chapter Four: Sorcerer" 5.4, 01:15:36-01:16:02).

After her initiation, Holly contradicts him by actively working on her own rescue. In the absence of the older heroines, Max, Eleven, and Kali (Linnea Berthelson), she takes charge, successfully leads the children out of Henry's mindscape, and even physically attacks him ("Chapter Eight: The Rightside Up" 5.8, 52:07). Ultimately, of course, all the characters work together to save her and the children; but it is crucial to recognize Holly's character growth from a scared, obedient girl into a strong heroine.

Holly as "Little Red Riding Hood"

Holly's path to knowledge and maturation leads her to open the forbidden "bloody chamber." In the show, the motif of the forbidden place has been transposed onto the forest, linking her character arc with yet another tale of female disobedience, "possibly the most famous cautionary tale of all times" (Tatar 35) "Little Red Riding Hood."

In the story, the little girl is sent to visit her grandmother: "Go and see how your grandmama is, because I've heard she isn't well. Take her one of these buns, and a little pot of butter" (Perrault, "Little Red Riding-Hood" 99). In the forest, she encounters Master Wolf, who "wanted very much to eat her up; but he did not dare, because there were some woodcutters in the forest" (Perrault, "Little Red Riding-Hood" 99). It is only the presence of the woodcutters, symbols of the (patriarchal) law, that save the girl from being immediately eaten (Zipes, *Trials* 54). Instead, he deceives her, challenging her to race to the grandmother's house. This is when the girl errs: she "amused herself gathering hazel-nuts, running after butterflies, and making posies out of the flowers that she saw" (Perrault "Little Red Riding-Hood" 99). The red riding-hood and the flower picking are some of the motifs that imbue the girl's

unruliness with sexual connotations (Vaz da Silva 178; Verdier 107), which especially disturbs the patriarchal reality that values female purity and virginity. At the grandmother's house, the girl makes a fatal mistake by undressing and getting into bed with a rapacious wolf. The girl's disobedience, recklessness, and unchecked sexuality thus make her complicit in her own death/rape (Tatar 11; Zipes, Introduction: The Remaking xvii). The nature of transgression is reiterated in Perrault's morals: in the first one, he warns about the danger presented by strangers. In the second one, however, he notes that these dangerous wolves are "Not howling, ravening or raging; / They're softly-spoken and discreet" and follow young ladies to their private chambers, where "They're not as friendly as they might appear" (Perrault "Little Red Riding-Hood" 103). Perrault is evidently warning young ladies not to be seduced by a shiny veneer.

It is worth mentioning that the Grimms further highlight the girl's disobedience by having the mother give elaborate instructions: "walk nicely and quietly and do not run off the path, or you may fall and break the bottle, and then your grandmother will get nothing; and when you go into her room, don't forget to say, 'Good morning,' and don't peep into every corner before you do it" ("Little Red-Cap" 98). The girl now explicitly strays from the correct path, literally and figuratively: "and so she ran from the path into the wood to look for flowers" ("Little Red-Cap" 99). When her behavior is interpreted as sexual deviance, it follows that she must be punished by the patriarchal laws, in this "patriarchal lesson in female obedience" (Orenstein 60). She has been given clear instructions and she "should have been better brought up" (Warner 243). Nevertheless, the Grimms allow her to survive her ordeal, as she is saved by a patriarchal figure that reinstates order, the huntsman ("Little Red-Cap" 99). However, in the

French oral story, “The Story of the Grandmother,” the little girl saves herself by fooling the werewolf. The wolf has already killed the grandmother and made the girl eat some of the remains (Delarue 15). Instead of a grim narrative, this story is about the inevitable circle of life, with the younger generation replacing the old, while profiting (as is natural) from the knowledge and experience of the ancestors, represented through the girl’s ingestion of the grandmother (Verdier 110). In this story of initiation, the girl successfully navigates the peril. She excuses herself from the bed to go to the toilet. The werewolf ties her ankle to keep her on the leash, but she ties her end to a tree and manages to escape (Delarue 16). The girl uses her own wit to outfox the werewolf and her initiation into adulthood and sexuality is not punished, but successful and necessary.

Holly’s journey into the woods is marked by disobedience from the very start. She is not merely warned not to stray from the path: she should not enter the forest at all. Yet, believing that Henry is in danger and asking for help, she braves the woods, allegedly full of monsters. Before doing so, she dons a cape, which further connects her with her fairy tale predecessor. As has been mentioned above, red is a symbol of sexuality and initiation to adulthood through menarche or the first sexual intercourse (Gates et al. 30; Vaz da Silva 178; Verdier 106). Holly’s cape is not the ubiquitous red, but of a golden, orange hue. Nevertheless, it serves the same symbolic purpose, understood as a sign of maturation, but also of the girl’s connection with her family. In the literary fairy tale, it is the grandmother who knits and gifts the cloak to her granddaughter, establishing a tangible and emotional link between the characters, whilst ascertaining that the girl’s “identity comes down to her from the hands of her

grandmother-patroness” (Do Rozario 237). In the show, it connects Holly to her brother, Mike, who has given her a *D&D* figurine, Holly the Heroic, whose attire matches Holly’s blue dress and orange cloak. As previously mentioned, throughout the series, “*D&D* is the marker by which [the protagonists’] character and growth . . . might be assessed” (Wetmore 65). The boys use the game to “interpret and understand the world conceptually” (Wetmore 64). Likewise, the figurine helps Holly, serving as a source of strength and a metaphor for her own identity. It is a crucial symbol of her maturation and finding her own way out of Vecna’s mindscape. Unlike Max, Holly does not need Kate Bush or a loving boyfriend to get out of the mind prison.³ She only needs to realize that she is not simply embodying Holly the Heroic by dressing up; she *is* Holly the Heroic, a courageous and clever girl who has saved Max, who has persisted even when the older girl has given up, and who is, finally, able to save herself (“Chapter Six: Escape from Camazotz” 5.6, 01:05:45-01:07:55).

For the Perrault heroine, straying off the path results in her downfall (Tatar 38). But for Holly, disobedience is crucial because this is how she meets her most important mentor, Max. In a subversion of common fairy tale motifs, Max is represented as the wolf of the “Little Red Riding Hood” fairy tale. While the oral tale includes the character of the werewolf, Perrault exchanges it for a common wolf, but the devilish connotations of the animal/supernatural being remain. The wolf is still connoted with “the bloody werewolf, the devil, insatiable lust, and chaotic nature” (Zipes, *Trials* 54). In Western culture, the wolf is used as a symbol of gluttony, predation, and rapaciousness; importantly, he is “first and foremost a male predator” (Mitts-Smith 4, 19).⁴ Max’s affiliation with the wolf is, therefore, transgressive both in terms of gender and the wolf-

figure being a positive influence. To begin with, the conflation of Max's role with the wolf is obvious in a scene where a yet-unnamed character lurks in the forest, watching Holly from the cover of the foliage ("Chapter Three: The Turnbow Trap" 5.3, 10:00). The gaze of this dangerous stranger, a seeming predator, is later revealed to be Max's point of view. Likewise, it is Max who lures Holly to stray from her orders and enter the forest. Ironically, she gives Holly a map, a literal itinerary she is to follow.⁵ The fact that Holly stays on the path set out for her her obedience is less significant than the major error she has already made: disobeying the prohibition in the first place. She has succumbed to the wolf's temptation. The final link between Max and wolf occurs after Holly has already recognized the other girl's identity. While tending to Holly's wound, Max says: "You can talk to me, you know. I won't bite" ("Chapter Four: Sorcerer" 5.4, 13:27). Instead of being a predator, Max, as a wolf stand-in, serves as a helper. Moreover, her friendship with Holly underlines another theme common in fairy tale adaptations: female companionship.

Holly and Her Friends: The Web of Community in Fairy Tales

It has already been mentioned that in fairy tales a woman's role is often simply to be the prize for the male hero (Propp 35). The male hero must brave many adversities to win this prize. In an opposite case, when it is women that vie for a husband, the marriage mart proves to be a cutthroat place. A fairy tale (step)mother is keen on securing advantageous matches for her own daughters, which is, according to Andrea Dworkin "her only real work in life . . . Her goal was upward mobility, and her ruthlessness was consonant with the values of the market place" (39). In any other type of contest, such as, for example, a competition for a material prize, women, often sisters, are also

pitted one against another, promoting “jealousy and divisiveness among girls” (Lieberman 385). This agrees with the deeply rooted patriarchal morals of these fairy tales, as “the division between Mother and Daughter, and between Sisters, is one of the cornerstones of patriarchy” (Duncker 229).

In the case of “Little Red Riding Hood,” while it is curious to find a fairy tale that features a family structure including only three women (Bernadette Bricout qtd. in Vaz da Silva 184), this story does not overtly promote sisterhood. The mother and the grandmother have minor roles, whereas the male figure “is all-important,” as Bruno Bettelheim says noting the role of the wolf and, in later versions, of the hunter (172).⁶ The female characters are side-lined or eliminated, leaving no possibility for the girl to develop meaningful relationships with any friend or family member, not just women.

In “Bluebeard,” however, there are other characters that the heroine is clearly close with: her friends and her siblings. To begin with, her friends and neighbors come visit her in Bluebeard’s absence. The text presents them in a negative light, as “impatient, ill-mannered, gadabout, and inquisitive nature” (Barzilai 19): they come without invitation, rummage around the house, and focus on material wealth (Perrault “Bluebeard” 106). Conversely, in a tentatively positive interpretation, their arrival without invitation may suggest a certain level of closeness with their hostess. Secondly, the heroine has a strong bond with her birth family (Lovell-Smith, “Anti-Housewives” 208). The brothers rush to her rescue, while her older sister, Anne, urges them on (Perrault, “Bluebeard” 109-13). Interestingly, according to Ruddick, it is society itself that sends the brothers to handle Bluebeard as the sister starts urging them on only after they are already on their way (350). This implies that they have been sent by the social authorities before the heroine finds

herself in imminent danger, which suggests that they have been keeping an eye on Bluebeard and on the heroine's wellbeing. Therefore, the heroine's rescue "reaffirms the protagonist's membership in a variety of social groups—humanity, women, family, the town" (Bacchilega, *Postmodern* 111).

Her kinship with others is especially evident in some of the "Bluebeard" variants, where she gets the help of (female) side characters. Within his household, there is often an old woman who is seemingly Bluebeard's helper but is also his prisoner. This character ultimately saves the heroine in stories such as "The Castle of Murder" and "The Robber Bridegroom" (Hempen 48). In "The Robber Bridegroom," for example, the old woman explains her master's murderous proclivities: "I have been forced to put a great kettle on there, with water in it, and when they [the robbers] have thee in their power, they will cut thee to pieces without mercy, will cook thee, and eat thee, for they are eaters of human flesh. If I do not have compassion on thee, and save thee, thou art lost" (Grimm and Grimm, "The Robber Bridegroom" 148). The old woman hides her and gets her out of the house of murder, after which the girl cleverly unmask her fiancé while pretending to be merely relating a dream. These variants thus often "emphasize women's wit, women's art, and women's storytelling as a means to escape violence and oppression" (Sweeney 150).

Later and contemporary retellings of "Bluebeard" often develop female side characters, giving them important roles. Like other re-interpretations of the tale that offer narratives "that involve various new visions of the female helper" (Lovell-Smith, "Anti-Housewives" 199), *Stranger Things* enables Holly to establish meaningful relationships within her community. There is, of course, her family, and notably her connection with Mike, who gives her the figurine she draws so much strength

from. Next, as a strong heroine herself, Nancy is adamant about protecting and saving her younger sister. Throughout the fifth season, Nancy's strongest motivation is Holly's rescue. Finally, their mother, Karen, also transforms from a stereotypical eighties housewife (Jackson Joseph 157). After witnessing and experiencing monster attacks, she steps up and fights them to protect her children ("Chapter Two: The Vanishing of Holly Wheeler" 5.2, 04:30). Both women represent strong, unruly female influences on Holly.

Yet Holly spends much of the fifth season of the show primarily in Max's company. As analyzed above, Max is a stand-in for the wolf figure in the "Little Red Riding Hood" storyline. As such, she subverts the stereotypical image of the wolf as a (male) predator and instead aligns with the role of the female helper akin to the one in "Bluebeard." In fairy tales, the heroine's helper is usually an older woman who teaches the younger girl important values and life skills (Frankel 37). In the French oral tale about the girl and the werewolf, this transmission of knowledge is literal, as the girl ingests her grandmother. As an older girl further along her path to adulthood, Max is not only Holly's friend, but her mentor, revealing the truth about Henry and teaching Holly to accept herself. The fact that she is first perceived as a monster fits the notion that the "authoritative female figure" who initiates the heroine "may even appear to be an enemy, at least at times" (Croft 55). Furthermore, like the old woman sometimes found in "Bluebeard" narratives, she is the villain's prisoner, having been detained in Henry's mindscape for eighteen months. Max also echoes sister Anne's "repugnance to Bluebeard" (Lovell-Smith, "Anti-Housewives" 198). Finally, at a crucial moment, Max brings Eleven and Kali to Holly and the other children, similarly to how sister Anne's biggest role is in ushering the

brothers to eliminate Bluebeard. Their strong bond is evident. Max reassures Holly: “And I’m not leaving your side, ever again. Not until we’re out of here. All of us” (“Chapter Eight: The Rightside Up” 5.8, 22:09-17).

This fits into the overarching theme of the show, as its “adolescents negotiate the complexities of friendship,” among other growing pains (Butler 73). Even when characters spend a lot of screen time apart from each other, “the show suggests that they can be just as strong separated as together” (McDaniel 214). Their friendships survive separation and discord. One of the fights, in fact, occurs with Eleven’s introduction into the group, which “clearly threatens the boys’ friendship unit” (Jackson Jopseph 159). Yet by the end of the last season, Eleven is an integral part of the group. These friendships “ultimately provide her with strength” to overcome her internal turmoil (Clemens-Smucker 65). When focusing on female friendships, it is significant that Eleven and Max do not immediately see eye to eye. Specifically, it is Eleven who is jealous of Max when she spends time with Mike (“Chapter Three: The Pollywog” 2.3, 42:47). This matches the patriarchal narratives where women are pitted against each other and cannot be friends because they vie for exclusive male attention. Yet the show undermines this message. In the third season, Eleven and Max finally strike up a firm friendship. Their time together is, according to Laura Tisdall, Eleven’s “most joyful moment in the series.” Notwithstanding the fact that this friendship is probably possible because Max is not threatening Eleven’s romance with Mike, the girls’ link is a strong and genuine one. In the fifth season, Eleven reminds the audience of that bond when tending to Hopper’s (David Harbour) wound and recalling it was Max who told her how to do that (“Chapter Two: The Vanishing of Holly Wheeler” 5.2, 35:02). Just like the various

versions of “Bluebeard” “prove the importance of communication between women and of female bonding in the patriarchal world of the *Märchen* in which a woman’s isolation only too often translates into her victimization [sic]” (Hempen 48), so too the friendships between *Stranger Things*’s female characters enable them to grow strong(er). Eleven learns from Max, not just about wounds, but about boys; she is also mentored by Kali, who “helps Eleven realize her potential and offers a place to belong” (Clemens-Smucker 66). While Holly does not spend a lot of time with these two girls, Max serves as her mentor, initiating her into knowledge of the world and encouraging her to find strength in herself so that she can save both herself and her friends, thus expanding the network of close-knit relationships. This is confirmed in the final scene of the show: Holly and her friends gathered around the *D&D* table, ready to tackle new adventures (“Chapter Eight: The Rightside Up” 5.8, 01:58:00).

Conclusion

Fairy tales have a long history of being used as didactic literature and promoting the desired values and social codes. For women, this usually meant that they were taught to be passive and obedient. Having turned towards feminism, contemporary fiction ameliorates that by constructing complex, strong female characters. One such character is *Stranger Things*’s Holly Wheeler. While the show’s primary genre is horror, Holly’s storyline is peppered with motifs that situate her within the fairy tale tradition. Like the heroine of “Bluebeard,” she is told to enjoy herself while abiding by her oppressor’s rules. Like Little Red Riding Hood, Holly is told to be mindful of the woods. Both traditional tales can be interpreted as stories about female initiation and sexuality: in “Bluebeard,” the girl

symbolically loses her virginity or commits adultery, while Little Red Riding Hood strays by engaging in unsanctioned sexual encounters. In both stories, the transgressions are figured as negative. Bluebeard's wife almost loses her life for her disobedience, before the male characters come save her, while her sister's role is sidelined. Little Red Riding Hood either dies or is raped (Perrault) or is saved after learning her lesson by being swallowed by the wolf (the Grimms). Holly Wheeler's path to maturation is not sexual, as she is still a preteen in the final season of the show. Henry is not romantically courting her, nor is her cape red, the color of blood and sex. Instead, her initiation into adulthood is initiation into knowledge. Henry entices her with the freedom she gets to experience in his childhood home, where she can indulge in pleasures such as cake and dancing. Yet, ironically, what would usually be understood as disobedience in children is actually Holly obeying Henry's orders not to exit the house. Her maturation begins when she bravely enters the forest despite Henry's prohibition. The childish entertainment offered by Henry becomes obsolete as Holly matures. Although Henry praises her as the smartest among her friends and therefore an excellent first guest in his house, his choice proves to be ironically detrimental to him because Holly is also the first child who reaches maturity by seeing through his deception and turning against him.

In the forest, she is initiated into knowledge by Max, who tells her the truth about Henry, making Holly realize she cannot blindly obey him. Max serves as both her mentor and friend, illustrating one of the most important themes of the show, friendship. However, ultimately, what Holly must realize is that the strength she needs is already located within her. In Robin's words to Will (Noah Schnapp): "I was looking for answers in

somebody else, but... I had all the answers” (Chapter Four: Sorcerer” 5.4, 46:13-23). Instead of only relying on Max and the other strong women to help her, Holly grows into a capable character herself. She draws her strength from her family and friends, evidencing the importance of social bonds. Furthermore, she also learns from cultural artefacts, including *A Wrinkle in Time* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, and, as this paper has shown, from intertextual references to her disobedient fairy tale predecessors. Unlike them, she is not shackled by patriarchal structures; her disobedience is, instead, positive and even necessary. Without her disobedience, she would never have managed to escape Henry’s mindscape. In this way, *Stranger Things* reaffirms its project of constructing strong, unruly female characters, who, phrased colloquially, slay.

Notes

¹ Although Henry as Vecna is obviously monstrous in his overall form, it is interesting to observe how the characters Other him. Mike calls him “that wrinkled, noseless, rotting bastard” (“Chapter One: The Crawl” 5.1, 00:28:40), and Dustin ultimately reiterates: “Well, the noseless bastard’s toast” (Chapter Eight: The Rightside Up” 5.8, 01:13:41). The particular monstrosity of having a specific-looking nose connects him with other popular villains, such as Harry Potter’s Voldemort (Łukasiewicz 212), but also with the “Bluebeard” tradition, as one Italian version, “Il naso d’argento,” features a silver-nosed villain (Warner 256).

² Barzilai notes that the English translations omit the emphasis of her friends being women, the “female neighbors of the bride, who share her impatient, ill-mannered, gadabout, and inquisitive nature” (19). The original text is more overtly positioned against women.

³ For more on the role of Kate Bush’s song “Running Up That Hill” in *Stranger Things*, see Croft in this issue.

⁴ Despite the existence of several influential counterexamples, where wolves are positive figures (for example, the adoptive mother of Romulus and Remus; the wolves in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*) (Mitts-Smith, 4, 15).

⁵ Instead of a "wolf," Henry himself calls Max a "fox" ("Chapter Five: Shock Jock" 5.5, 00:56:34). While a fox is a long-standing symbol of cunningness (Max has been cleverly evading Henry for months), and in this case probably a play on Max's red hair, it is curious to note that "Mr. Fox" is a variant of the "Bluebeard" tale. The tale ostensibly urges women to be "bold, be bold, but not too bold" (8), but after its heroine discovers the dead bodies of Mr. Fox's wives, she finds a clever way to relate the story to the public so that he is killed before having a chance to hurt her (9-10). More explicitly cordial to women than Perrault's version, the story contains the motifs of Holly and Max's narrative: female disobedience, courage, and resourcefulness.

⁶ The mother's only role is to impose (patriarchal) rules onto the girl, like a mouthpiece of Lacan's Law of the Father. The grandmother is punished for gifting the girl the red cape, which is, according to Bruno Bettelheim, "a symbol of a premature transfer of sexual attractiveness" (173). In his interpretation, the girl was not psychologically ready for initiation into adulthood. Even in more positive interpretations and fairy tale variants, such as the oral tale, where the initiation is successful, the death of the grandmother suggests that there is no place for older members of society once they outlive their usefulness. There is, therefore, no obvious case of (female) intergenerational or intragenerational connection in "Little Red Riding Hood."

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