This is about a story of hegemony and resistance, or put another way, a story of narrative and its discontents. Or a story of the ideological state apparatus and the uninterpellated citizen. Or the structuralist/capitalist aegis of modern Western culture and the noncompliant socialist. Or the heteronormative, heteroreproductive, Mosaic, determinist, natural, and pre-ordained order of things and the perverse. Or structure and system. Or interspecies desire. Or how binary notions of complementary gender turn into non-binary multiples. Or Little Red Riding Hood.

This story never goes away. A little girl dons her favorite red velvet hood to visit her ailing grandmother who lives in the woods. On the way, the little girl meets a wolf who suggests that she pick some flowers to take to her grandmother. The girl dallies while the wolf rushes to Grandma’s house, and finding Grandma in bed, swallows her. Disguising himself as the grandmother, the Wolf takes her place. Little Red Riding Hood finally makes it to Grandma’s abode, where the wolf swallows her as well. Sated, the wolf falls asleep and snores loudly, the noise rousing the interest of a passing hunter who investigates, finds the wolf, cuts him open (in the Grimm tale with scissors), and

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1. With thanks to Hannah Biggs.
releases the two victims who both live happily ever after while the hunter takes the grim remainder—the wolf’s skin—home with him.²

Like all fairy tales, “Little Red Riding Hood” is a cautionary story. The obvious lesson of the Grimm version is to avoid wandering from the straight-and-narrow, or, in its more modern guise, “don’t talk to strangers.” In its doublings (two female victims, two male assailants), repetitions (two ingestions), reversals (assailant becomes victim, victims are unswallowed, or perhaps reborn via a crude Caesarean), the tale is easy fodder for Proppian analysis.³ Critics read the tale as a political allegory, a sex/gender/predation allegory, as fodder for psychoanalytic interpretation, and have interpreted it as an interrogation of the relation between narrative injunction and behavior and as a specimen text illustrating the problem of the construction of the body and the book, “bound and unbound” in texts.⁴ The tale could also easily be read in relation to one or several of the following: pedophilia, rape, voyeurism, seduction, exhibitionism, cougar-phobia, oral sex, anal sex, and bestiality, or as a coming-of-age narrative. There have been at least five scholarly books or edited collections on the tale since 1989, and, of course, innumerable popular cultural versions in children’s books, puppet shows, children’s theatre, and films.⁵

Little Red Riding Hood has also repeatedly been made into animations. Many of the cartoon versions, particularly from the 1930s and 40s, torque the narrative towards the more overtly sexual, bestial, and curiously anal, producing such variations as the married wolf actually going for bigamy with the grandmother in the 1931 Van Beuren Studio’s Little Red Riding Hood, with a Riding Hood that looks like Minnie Mouse.⁶ In the 1931 Betty Boop Dizzy

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² This is a summary of the Grimm Brothers’ version of the tale, available at http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0333.html#grimm.

³ Vladimir Propp’s analyses of folktale elements in Morphology of the Folktale would characterize the various elements of this tale as fitting into functional categories, such as, for example, “The Hero Leaves Home” (Red Riding Hood) or “The Villain Is Defeated” (The Hunter kills the wolf) that recur in many tales as structural elements. These are “structural” not only because they play among series of opposites but also because the practice of breaking story processes down into smaller parts derives from the practices of structural linguistics.

⁴ As political allegory, see Raufman and Ben-Canaan, “Red Riding Hood”; as sex/gender/predation, see Attwood, “Who’s Afraid of Little Red Riding Hood?”; as a psychoanalytical inquiry, see Joosen, “To Be or Not To Be Tamed?”; Dundes, “Interpreting Little Red Riding Hood Psychoanalytically”; Laruccia, “Little Red Riding Hood’s Metacommentary”; and Pettit, “Books and Bodies, Bound and Unbound.”


⁶ Although there are various claims that Disney sued Van Beuren for its characters’ similarities to Disney’s Mickey and Minnie Mouse, I can find no record of such a suit.
Red Riding Hood, Betty consummates something with her dog, Bimbo, who is dressed in wolf’s clothing. Tex Avery resets his 1943 Red Hot Riding Hood in Hollywood with a predatory Grandma and a burlesque Riding Hood. In the Bugs Bunny remake, Little Red Riding Rabbit (1944), a gawky, unattractive Riding Hood begs for the attentions of a wolf who is far more preoccupied with Bugs. The Bugs Bunny version ends with the hapless wolf, balanced spread-legged over a fire and weighted down with every piece of iron Fritz Freleng’s crew can conjure, trading places with the dorky Riding Hood, who is left to grill in the Wolf’s weighted and enflamed “split” position. Monty Python’s version transforms Red Riding Hood into a John Cleese amazon, Grandma’s house into NASA, and the wolf into Buzz Aldrin, while the contemporary “Bedtime Story” version transforms Red Riding Hood into a savvy Y-Gen youth who speaks psycho-babble and has the wolf castrated.7 And preceding all of these, the medieval Renard the Fox tales feature a trickster—the clever red fox Renard (like a vulpine Riding Hood) and his archenemy, the institutional wolf, Ysengrin.8 Many of the cartoon versions refigure Red Riding Hood as a trickster, merging these foxy types.

This range of versions is not simply testimony to the tale’s longevity or media creativity. Something in the basic terms of this narrative itself produces multiple versions not as merely variations on the same pattern, but also as continually generated from its open set of possibilities. Whether we see these as “variations” (simple substitutions within the same paradigm) or as “versions” (broad recombinations of widely analogized story elements instigated by an openness to multiples and added according to a rule) depends upon how we conceive of narrative itself. If we envision narrative as a structure that proceeds according to a conventional paradigm—journey, danger, disaster, salvation—by which tensions are resolved, then the arrangement of events in relation to one another and to the character types possible offers only a few possibilities for alteration. We can always find the same pattern.

Reading Little Red Riding Hood as a paradigm assumes that narrative is a structural pattern defined by binary elements in the tradition of Propp, Lévi-

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7. There are innumerable animated versions of the tale that also tell the story “straight.” The context of these torqued cartoons is that with the exception of the online versions, they were the studio cartoon accompaniments packaged as a part of an evening’s film fare and were therefore aimed at adults.

8. Le Roman de Renart is a French folklore character whose tales were first written in the twelfth century by Pierre de Saint-Cloud. The satirical fabliaux play on the cleverness of the underdog red fox against the stiff bêtises of the institutional Wolf. Although the Grimm version of “Little Red Riding Hood” is not satirical, many of the animated versions are. See for example, Paulin Paris, Le Roman de Renart. Red Riding Hood’s trickster qualities, evident in the torqued retellings, suggest some collapse of the Renart figure with the Red Riding Hood narrative.
Part I, Chapter 2

Strauss, Brooks, and Barthes—in fact in the tradition of most theories of narrative. In the long tradition of structuralist analyses of narrative, narrative theorists and narratologists have conceived of narrative in the binary terms that have informed structural linguistics and narratology. We cannot talk about narrative except through narrative, and all of the elements we might identify arrive already as binaries distributed into passive/active, boundary/passage, inside/outside positions in the story. This, for example, is the argument Teresa de Lauretis astutely corrals in her chapter on “Desire in Narrative” in the 1984 Alice Doesn’t. Showing that concepts of male and female are aligned with active and passive roles in the distribution of positions in plot, de Lauretis demonstrates how structural notions of narrative delimit the female role to “plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter,” while the male (or masculine—there is some slippage here) hero is an active human subject, “the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences” (119). De Lauretis’s argument also demonstrates the self-generating circle between narrative structure and gender as necessarily binary.

The concept of narrative is not only dependent upon the tenets of structuralism, its underlying pattern is the looming and inescapable story of Oedipus, from which there seems to be no alternative or outside insofar as trying be outside of Oedipus might be an Oedipal move. Roland Barthes famously reads this “Oedipal pleasure” as the desire “to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end” and continues, characterizing narrative pleasure not as suspense, but as “intellectual . . . if it is true that every narrative (every unveiling of the truth) is a staging of the (absent, hidden, or hypo-statized) father—which would explain the solidarity of narrative forms, of family structures, and of prohibitions of nudity” (Pleasure 10). In his The Pleasure of the Text (1975) as well as arguably in his semiotic decoding of Balzac’s “Sarrasine” in the earlier S/Z (1974), Barthes is already looking for ways around the apparent hegemony of this Oedipal narrative of narrative by focusing on “neither culture nor its destruction”—the apparent joy of oedipal narrative—but instead on the erotics of “the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so” (7).

Thinking of narrative as primarily structural in this way envisions structure as defining the possibilities and arrangement of cause–effect relations

9. Following the insights of structural linguistic and structural anthropology, both Peter Brooks and Roland Barthes offer accounts of narrative as a structural process. In “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” Barthes undertakes an extended analysis of narrative in structural terms. In “Freud’s Masterplot” as well as in Body Work, Peter Brooks develops an account of narrative in relation to desire, which ultimately reaffirms the curiously binary character of some psychoanalytic accounts of desire (i.e., Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle) as well as conceptions of the body itself.
within a certain pattern that matches our imaginary of sexuality and capitalism." If we hypothesize that events in a narrative are constrained by their necessary alignment with the conventional taxonomies of story structure and tension, then only certain kinds of variations are possible for any story—and these only appear as variations of the same structure—as substitutions slotted in archetypal roles deployed in archetypal patterns.

If we apprehend narrative as a system instead of a repeated paradigmatic activity, we understand narratives as persistently generated by their own systems’ rules instead of being the product of a grander paradigmatic substitution. A system is a set of elements that interrelate according to a system “rule” or generating principle. Each version of a story recombines a range of possibilities according to this rule. This “rule” distinguishes the elements of one story system from other story systems as well as from the environment in which these systems function. A systems perspective on Little Red Riding Hood would mean that the elements—the characters, relationships, and objects—comprised by the designation “Red Riding” (“Little” and “Hood” being the constantly changing titular terms) can manifest in any permutation and combination conceivable within the rule of the “Red Riding” system. The rule of the “Red Riding” system consists of three elements: (1) Host and guest characters whose relation is interrupted by a third, (2) the serial ingestion of characters, and (3) the transformability of characters. In relation to this system rule, changes in elements, cause–effect relationships, and actors can occur at any point in the process instead of conforming to a paradigmatic exigency that requires oppositions (protagonist/antagonist, good/bad, beginning/end, or even the finer binary distinctions developed by narratologists). Within the system many elements can shift and recombine as long as these processes cohere with the system’s rule. Characters’ personalities and relative positions of empowerment and roles in the system can change. Actions such as ingestion, which can be imagined as anything within the conceivable range of alternatives, substitutes, analogies, or ironic contradictions (i.e., sexual predation, marriage, victimization), can occur in any of a number of possible settings with characters and character traits that draw from a broad range of permutations.

As a story generated by this “rule” “Red Riding” also has a relation to the larger environment of all narrative. The “Red Riding” system belongs to and is a set of story versions in an environment of narrative practice that consists of multiple contexts, different media, audiences, and literary traditions. The system “Red Riding” incorporates its relation to this larger narrative envi-

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10. See Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* 26; and Judith Roof, *Come As You Are.*
vironment as an aspect of its system so that the system “Red Riding” not only generates stories according to its own rule, it also manages that operation in its relation to the larger environment of narrative it has included as a part of its own system. This means that understood within a systems logic, “Red Riding” is a system composed of a rule, sets of elements, and the relation between that rule and the environmental conventions of narrative in relation to which its rule might operate. All of this functions within a larger environment of narratives, narrative conventions, media, and contexts. Different narratives may be generated from different systems, but these systems can interact with one another and with the larger environment of narrative convention, media, and context.¹¹

The rules of the “Red Riding” system generate points (or nodes) where the operation of the system produces the convergence of elements (character and character, character and setting, character and action, etc.). These points elicit alternatives; like *The Wizard of Oz* scarecrow, these nodes offer multiple directions as long as the choices comply with the systems’ rules. Not only can the characters veer at the literal junctures on the path to Grandma’s (i.e., end up in Hollywood instead of the woods), the characters themselves may also morph into any number of different versions of a triad of the guest, host, predator, and rescuer, who then triangulate with and morph into one another in a variety of possible ways. Each choice shifts the possibilities for the next in a feedback effect that shapes the version. Choosing Hollywood, for example, as a setting might define the characters as performers and vice versa. As long as the “Red Riding” rule governs the choices, almost any track within the logic of the system might be used to get from beginning to end. The same dynamic may be reconstituted in multiple versions that work that same dynamic in any number of different ways.

A systems perspective, thus, offers a more complex account of narrative as a persistent choosing within a broad range of elements that always coexist as the material of a generating system. Versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* are, thus, not merely variations of the same paradigm, but multiple versions generated from possibilities produced by the “Red Riding” rule itself. This helps account for its perverse shifts in context, in character personality, in what counts as ingestion and its reverse generated by the system’s rule. We recog-

¹¹. Although systems thinking is a large field, the simplest understanding of system comes from Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s *Tree of Knowledge*, Cary Wolfe’s *What Is Posthumanism?* and Bruce Clarke’s *Posthuman Metamorphosis*. There is a systems version of Little Red Riding Hood in which every element is laid out in relation to its own register and system. See Tomas Nilsson’s *Slagsmålsklubben*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y54ABqSOScQ>. Accessed 30 Jan. 2012.
nize the tale because we already know what the range of permutations can be, not because the tale is a pattern to be reiterated as variations, but because we know its rule and can imagine the permutations it might generate.

The transformational aspect of “Red Riding”’s rule means that while the system appears to provide definitive agents—Red Riding Hood, Grandma, Wolf, Hunter—the tale forms around characters who openly morph or betray a potential for morphing as an intrinsic part of their definition as character. Characters within the “Red Riding” system contain in themselves potential perversity in the etymological sense of the word as “a turning away from.” The possibilities of this transformational capacity are subject only to the rule’s other tenets—host/guest/predator, ingestion and its reversal, transformability—that organize the system. The Wolf turns into Grandma or a playboy or an automobile or sexual prey (and in the past few years has turned into a Werewolf, a sort of meta-metamorpher), who can fall in love with, eat, pursue, or ogle Red Riding Hood or Grandma or Bugs, who can end up dead, at the altar with Grandma, beside a rabbit, or as Buzz Aldrin. Grandma can become a victim or a rejuvenated cougar who turns into fodder and/or sexual prey and ends up reborn, happy, pricked, or jilted at the altar. Red Riding Hood morphs into fodder/prey/vixen/sadist/enlightened child. The hunter takes off with the skin to do what, we don’t know—except that the skin is the thing that emblemizes the trope of metamorphosis itself.

The transformational rule of “Red Riding” not only accounts for the characters’ ranges of forms, but also shifts the narrative from a moral-producing lesson to a variety of increasingly perverse scenarios (perverse in the Freudian sense that the aims and objects do not mesh with any reproductive impetus). So, for example, at the point where the Wolf first encounters Little Red Riding Hood played by Boop, her dog Bimbo may already have taken over the Wolf’s skin, transforming himself from pet to predator. Or at the point where the Wolf is about to eat Grandma, she transforms into a lascivious vixen (predictably wearing red) and pursues him. Because these possibilities are generated by the operations of the system’s “rule” instead of slotting into a pre-existent paradigm, Little Red Riding Hood’s versions do not necessarily replay the heteroreproductive, capitalist narrative structure of joinder and completion to which we are accustomed as the premise of narrative satisfaction. Using a generating rule, story systems easily produce nonbinary, non-oppositional, nonhierarchical, and even potentially nonideologically driven dynamics of telling, including the possibility that desire might torque away not just from the heteronormative and heteroreproductive, but also from urges towards completion, satisfaction, and quiescence—in other words, from ends themselves as well as from any impetus we might identify as sadistic,
masochistic, or even curious. Although the Grimm version of *Little Red Riding Hood* ends with a lesson—knowledge as the gain of conflict—many other renditions simply leave off with perpetuated lust, predation, and/or oscillating morphings.

A good example of all of these alternatives is Tex Avery’s 1943 cartoon, *Red Hot Riding Hood*. Beginning with a traditionally prosaic exposition of what appears to be the conventional tale, the characters rebel in a self-reflexive moment, transforming from *Little Red Riding Hood* stereotypes into the jaded personae of typecast Hollywood performers playing parts. The cartoon recommences as *Red Hot Riding Hood* set in Hollywood, and featuring a Wolf who has become a sexual predator, a Riding Hood who has become a nightclub performer who sings like Betty Grable and talks like Katharine Hepburn, and a cougar Granny who pursues the Wolf. The positions of host, guest, and third-party predator are completely interchangeable. As the Wolf goes after Red Hot Riding Hood, she turns him down and escapes to Grandma’s penthouse, where the Wolf encounters the energetically horny Grandma. Her pursuit apparently teaches the Wolf the evil of his ways, and although he pricks Granny with a pin, sending her sky high, he swears off his oglings, returns to the nightclub, and, promising himself if he stares he’ll kill himself, he stares and kills himself. As a ghostly remainder, he continues his ogling.

This text lends itself to two obvious readings. One, Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, neither of whom is what she or he seems to be (a fact that is revealed in that early meta-cartoon moment), proceed nonetheless to play out their roles as host/victim and guest/predator, although it becomes less clear which is which. In the Grimm version, the grandmother is a host/mediator, a middle figure who, upon having been eaten, becomes a liminal being neither human nor animal, female nor male, alive nor dead, but all and none. There is, however, no end to desire in the Tex Avery version. Grandma, too, is a predator and the chase continues. Even death does not wither the wolf’s constant resurrection, and the moral might be that no matter how far and in what guise we wander, the “rule” lives on.

In a second reading, the Avery version’s reversal of the traditional tale seems to realign the relative powers of male and female through a Chinese-box series of enframements. The version consists of a self-reflective outer frame, a second frame of the traditional story of the wolf pursuing Red Riding Hood, and a third enframed narrative in which the male/female, guest/host roles appear to be reversed, Grandma chasing the Wolf, where the Wolf, the apparent victim, becomes the victor, though arguably Grandma also gets the pricking she wants. Ingestion has become lust. Red Riding Hood’s apparent control over the scenario also reverses the relative
empowerment of male/female, but leaves in place the relation between human/tamer and untamed/beast. At the same time, the enframed narrative of younger beast/older woman appears to offer a misogynistic and ageist response to what is presented as the absurdity of the lusty older woman. This enframed Grandma/Wolf narrative is literally surrounded by the male/predator, female/prey narrative of the Wolf and Red Riding Hood in which neither is the victor and nothing is decided. Red Riding Hood continues to perform (which we could argue is a position both of power and of objectification), and the Wolf continues as an enthusiastic yet unsatisfied voyeur without either side having any resolution—that is, getting to stop or getting to “eat.” We could read this as a vaguely feminist tale, as Red Riding Hood—the tricky Renard (red is the clue) of Avery’s version—always fools the Wolf, even though she ends up in a perpetual burlesque loop on stage. The cartoon’s self-referential frame, however, poses the traditional tale as a hovering alternative version and point of perpetual comparison, making Red Hot Riding Hood simultaneously a version of a traditional tale and something else, a version born of intrinsic morphing that never ends at all, as Avery produces a sequel, Little Rural Riding Hood (1949), in which Red Hot Riding Hood appears again, singing the same song on the same stage, but this time doubled by a truly goofy country cousin.

From its metanarrative frame, Avery’s Red Hot Riding Hood elicits a comparison to the Grimm version, morphs that tale into two different narratives about what appear to be cautionary tales of sex and power, then offers two endings, both ambivalent. In its multiply enframed versions of predation, Red Hot Riding Hood does not offer a definitive cautionary tale about sex, gender, rebellion against the Man, sex with older women, or anything else. We might conclude, in a fairly reductive way, that the text is woman-friendly if ageist, insofar as the male figure is depicted as an animal who never gets the eponymous heroine but is left with Grandma. Or, as a current critical fashion might suggest, Red Hot Riding Hood is really the tale of interspecies desire and of how a civilized humanocentric cleverness overcomes the predator/guest/beast, who nonetheless never goes away—who is, like Derrida’s cat, always looking.12

If the Avery version were simply a variant of a dominant narrative, it might be a cautionary tale based on distinct binaries premised on sex/gender. Its ingestions are sexual; its reversal and remainder are also sexual. But what if the tale consists of the metanarrative of circulating and perpetuated desire

12. Jacques Derrida’s The Animal That Therefore I Am commences with a question raised by the author’s experience of being seen naked by a cat.
itself? There would not be two sexes in the tale, but many gender regimes that spread among species, ages, roles, and circumstances. Everyone is predator, prey, seducer, onlooker; everyone is trickster, tricked, unsatisfied, clever, and thwarted. Everyone can transform into something else, as long as the dynamic works via the system’s rule. But is concluding this just a matter of thinking differently? Does working in an “other” way change the story and our story of the story, or is that “otherness” already a part of the story to be recontained by the story itself?

Non-Paradigmatic Others; or How Systems Envision Multiples, Delivering Gender from Binary Conceptions

“Red Riding” is also a system that depends on the perpetual interruption of the guest and host figures by a third interloper. This interruptive pattern inaugurates something other than a binary structure, a concept taken up by both Ross Chambers and Michel Serres. Chambers fleshes out the ways narrative may not align with what Barthes defined as narrative’s Oedipal impetus. Chambers’s 1991 *Room for Maneuver*, for example, specifically addresses the way narrative itself might provide some sort of opposition to structures of dominant power transposed from the narrative to the political. The tome commences with an epigram from Michel Serres’s *The Parasite* (2007) that evokes the tale of the fox and the wolf in an uncanny reverberation of Red Riding Hood’s incorporation of elements from both classical and the Renard traditions. Serres’s book plays with the idea that any relation between two beings defined by a rule of hospitality will always be interrupted by a third party whose advent both repeats the host–guest relation and alters the relative roles of the participants, offering a third function and perspective. All binaries ultimately consist of a series of triadic relationships. This scenario, governed by a rule by which the parasite/guest always turns into a host in an unending process of serial addition, produces the sense of this third party or “tranche” as the element whose advent transforms the roles of the first two, much in the same way as the advent of the wolf transforms both Riding Hood and Grandma from one function to another. At the same time, this interloping third is also the perspective from which the positions of the first two can be perceived. Three is always a necessary appurtenance of binaries

13. Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of a “regime” in *A Thousand Plateaus* is that it is a “specific formalization of expression” (111). This formalization, they declare, “constitutes a semiotic system” which, as they warn, “is always a form of content that is simultaneously inseparable from and independent of the form of expression, and the two forms pertain to assemblages that are not principally linguistic” (111).
insofar as three is always implied by two (according to Lacan’s interpretation of Fregean numbers).  

In evoking Serres’s “third tranche” *Room for Maneuver* opens up an entirely different realm of narrative possibility in Serres’s systemic rule of a serial opening out into a perpetuated shifting premised on the relations among three functions. As illustration of how this principle of transformed position functions, Chambers cites Serres’s passage from *The Parasite* about the fox and the wolf of La Fontaine’s fable, which Serres offers as illustration of a narrative machine of undecidability around a desire produced by a third-term illusion—the illusion that something exists—the interloper, the unattainable object—that would satisfy a desire. In La Fontaine's fable, the fox, looking in a well, sees a reflection of the full moon which he mistakes as a wheel of cheese. The hungry fox jumps into the well's pail, which descends into the bottom of the well, where the fox is trapped, his illusion of cheese having disappeared in the waves produced by his own catastrophe. The fox waits until the wolf comes along and invites him to share the cheese/moon which is now no longer a wheel, but a partial crescent. The wolf jumps into the opposing pail and descends, lifting the fox out of the well and trapping himself. Serres’s question, cited in part by Chambers, is:

> Of the fox and the wolf, which one is better, the stronger or the smarter? I think by playing the game of competition, playing this game of slyer, stronger, crueler, these species have disappeared, leaving man alone to play this game of destruction. But before there were no more foxes or wolves, a question about intelligence could be asked. In fact, it was this question that killed the foxes and the wolves. Aesop chose the fox and La Fontaine the wolf; teachers like to classify things. I think that they are equivalent, and I think that it all depends. Sometimes it’s Achilles, sometimes Ulysses; sometimes the pendulum swings one way, sometimes the other. This game is a machine that comes and goes like the balance beam of an assay scale. Our justice or our scourge? (74)

Serres’s reading of the fabulists appears to reconfirm the binary character of the narrative project, especially insofar as the question of intelligence seems to have eliminated a multiplicity of species from the scene in favor of the one and same—in favor of what he deems “equivalent.” Competition would seem to consist of opposing parties who embody a binary distinction, except

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14. Jacques Lacan’s use of Frege’s numbers suggests that any number is a set that can only be perceived from the position of the next number. For example, 3 is 4, 4 is 5, and so on. See Jacques-Alain Miller’s “Suture: On the Logic of the Elements of the Signifier.”
as a list of thinkers from Derrida to Irigaray would suggest, these opposites are always versions of the same. And the essential equivalence of binaries may be precisely the point insofar as the assay scale is not a machine of the binary at all, but always turns on a third term. This third term—the balancing point of the assay scale, the interloping third party—enables infinite changeability that may free narrative from its overdetermined oedipality along with the binaries any structural analysis both produces and requires. The question exemplified by Red Riding Hood’s persistent morphings and Serres’s assay scale is how systems thinking might assay the assay: how breaking up binaries generates change. An effect of this is the dissolution of all binaries into non-oppositional, interconstitutive multiples. And insofar as binary gender is a product of narrative just as narrative might be a product of binary gender (in a rehearsal of systemic interconstitutionality), the introduction of perpetuating multiples breaks even gender up into genders whose relation is no longer oppositional or complementary, but simply differential, sliding, varietal, much like Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “assemblage.”

A systems concept of narrative, thus, might alter the ways we conceive of the binary sex/gender pretexts such theorists as Barthes, de Lauretis, and others have suggested subtend narrative. Does Little Red Riding Hood’s transformational economy provide an opportunity and even perhaps the assumptions through which we might envision sex/gender/sexuality as more broadly multiple, changing, unpredictable, and unloosed from the oedipal heteroreproductive aegis that narrative reproduces as its own etiology? What, in other words, if Serres is wrong? What if the never-quite-oppositional fox and the wolf both survive, eclipsed perhaps by the anxious human, but never quite the same, and never quite equivalent? What if their transformative capacities continue to play, which, as we have seen, appears to be the case in “Red Riding” versions? Answers to this question may not, as Barthes, Chambers, et al. might wish, escape ideological complicity, but they might make that complicity less clear, more chaotic and multiply invested.

15. In their differing ways and contexts, both Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray understand oppositions as versions of a single phenomenon. See, for example, Derrida’s “Before the Law” in Acts of Literature and Irigaray’s “This Sex Which Is Not One” in This Sex Which Is Not One.

16. According to Deleuze and Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus, an “assemblage” exists on two axes. The “horizontal” axis “comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression” (88). This axis is both a “machinic assemblage of bodies, or actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another,” and “a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies” (88). Deleuze and Guattari’s “vertical axis” consists of “territorial sides, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and cutting edges of deterritorialization, which carry it away” (88).
If conceptions of gender are loosed from attachment to binary paradigms and if conceiving of stories as systems enables that loosing, then what might define genders? If each “story” is a system generating versions, then narrative as a practice is less a paradigmatic practice than sets of assemblages in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of the term as amalgamations of desires, significations, interactions, and transient meanings and functionings. Given the rules of story systems and the range of material available, stories may well play against paradigmatic and ideological imperatives, ranging into all kinds of possibilities. Narrative is an assemblage of regime/first-order systems whose evocation, marked by morphing nodal points (which are often not quite so self-referentially visible as they are in “Red Riding”), instates multiple possibilities and imports different systemic imperatives without necessary regard to any overriding metanarrative or ideology. Insofar as our making sense of narrative tends to reduce it to sets of binaries organized within a specific hetero-ideological impetus, this unbinding might seem to be unlikely. However, the vagaries of interpretation suggest that metanarratives are themselves up for grabs, often depending on the assumptions that govern the interpretive process itself. Do we seek, for example, closure or infinite play? Singularity or multivalency? The old critical questions.

What we have to account for is how, at any given point in what we regard as a story, every possibility coexists as a knowable set of selections. The intersections of these multiple systems constitute points where choices have and can be made. The nodes appear as morphings that might veer or sidetrack the valences and actions of characters and offer infinite and irreducible variety at points where conventional binaries might have held sway. The characters’ morphing does not reliably occur at any traditional narrative plot point associated with transformation, but instead travels with and as an effect of a certain understanding of character as that which turns. The characters of Little Red Riding Hood are the equivalent of Barthes’s provocative “seams,” except they open outwardly instead of providing a peep. The nodes’ systemic intersections do not make all of the competing systemic imperatives visible as such, but instead represent a choice already made that turns the logic of the story itself into something else. Whatever impetus seems to have governed the anticipated direction of the story to closure shifts to a different set of operations—from a morality lesson, say, to an exhibition of desire for its own sake. And the character agents of this are no longer bound to oppositional roles, including genders themselves as necessary binary.

At the beginning of Red Hot Riding Hood, for example, the Wolf suddenly reveals that he is an actor playing a role with which he is not too happy. This self-conscious shift evokes the discourses of animation, metacinema,
self-referentiality, class, the traditional tale, the imperatives of censorship, and Tex Avery as an auteur, at a minimum. The text alters from the anticipated “Grimm” Little Red Riding Hood to a dynamic of self-consciousness and rebellion that morphs and restarts the story according to a different set of presumptions about setting and character. Even within this shift the Wolf’s morphing from suave man-about-town to rowdy horndog enacts another intersection of systemic logics and imperatives—this time about class, Hollywood cinema, celebrity culture, and slapstick. What these nodal morphings demonstrate is that what we might regard as the story of the story constantly changes in the middle, moving in different directions, not randomly, but in relation to which systems (and their adherent imperatives) might take over at any given point. And that which takes over engages as much perverse variety as the choices already made permit, which means that given a necessarily perverse trajectory, characters display idiosyncratic attributes that remove them from conventional gender taxonomies.

As the versions of Red Riding Hood show, not only are we well aware of the range of possibilities and keep them in mind, but one choice or another can change the story vastly, much as we may try to recuperate it either via comparison to the origin (and hence it becomes a variation) or via interpretation itself—another narrative that reinstalls structure or susses out what structure might be operating to the exclusion of other kinds of dynamics. Red Riding Hood anatomizes the nature of the story itself as never a secure logic, but as always up for grabs. Another way to envision this evisceration of narrative logics is to regard narrative itself as a system that can observe how all of the story systems in its environment work. Narrative hosts the perpetual intersecting of systems that make desire itself visible, not as the necessary engine or effect of narrative nor even as the dominant mode of the story of the story with which we have long been familiar, but as a selective impetus bound to no single dynamic. Narrative is a desire machine that returns to something in the subject, but which is nonetheless detached from it. This machinic Desire operates in a way analogous to Francisco Varela’s notion of the “micro-identity”: as the “readiness-for-action proper to every . . . situation” (10).

In all of this, the determining attributes of any paradigmatic conception of narrative fade into the environment. To the extent to which narrative is understood as a rehearsal of cultural ideologies that defines the positions proper to agency while reiterating the conventional contexts within which they operate, narrative both produces and reconfirms a very binary notion of gender as complementary and asymmetrical opposites. But to the extent to which narrative might equally be regarded as a system of systems, it may host as well an emancipation from the kind of thinking that assumes structure
at the cost of non-oppositional multiplicity, variety, and possibility. When it comes to gender, this shift offers conceptual tools for revising the impasses of gender inequality and the inevitable binaries of “queer” thinking by offering a mechanism for recounting stories, agencies, and genders outside of any paradigmatic necessity.

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