

Title: How can designers engage with cultural myth to influence popular contemporary culture?

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How can designers engage with cultural myth to influence popular contemporary culture?

Traditional fairytales are familiar to all of us, but they often contain messages that encourage gender stereotypes that should be questioned. This essay explores the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, showing how it has evolved over time and how its narrative has encouraged an image of passive femininity in young women. It then goes on to explore ways in which modern designers might challenge that narrative by using old familiar symbols in new ways.

Little Red Riding Hood is a very powerful tale with strong symbolism that has been told, retold and changed over centuries as society has changed with it. It began as an oral tale told by peasants in premodern France (Darnton, 1984, p. 9). This early version was very violent and sexualised. In this version the girl does not wear a red hood as yet. She sets out on a walk in the woods to go and see her grandmother. She is intercepted by the wolf, who asks her where she is going. She tells him she is going to see her grandmother. Then the wolf asks her if she is going through the path of pins or needles to which she responds needles (Darnton, 1984, p. 10). This suggests that, no matter which way she goes, there is no safe path for her because this is not like later tales where there are safe choices. In the early tale, there are no safe choices, only danger, because peasant life at the time was full of danger. The suggestion in the tale is that it's not safe for girls to go out because they might encounter multiple threats wherever they go.

The wolf then takes the path of pins and gets to her grandmother's house before her. The wolf kills the grandmother and puts her blood in a bottle, chops her up, serves her body parts as a refreshments for the girl when she arrives (Darnton, 1984, p. 10). This is a deliberate dark twist on an act of kindness, turning the preparation of food for a traveler into an act of cannibalism. The girl then removes all her articles of clothing one by one while the wolf watches. She proceeds to get into bed with him and he kills her (Darnton, 1984, p. 10). This provides a message to young women warning them that a man can be a 'wolf' and seduction and violence is always possible (Orenstein, 2002, p. 4). This early tale is full of violence and crude sexual references, in a way we would not see in a contemporary telling of a fairy tale. This reflects the fact that society at the time, especially peasant society, was full of violence and danger.

Little Red Riding Hood has had a lot of controversy surrounding the themes and symbolism within the story. Over time it has come to be seen as exploring themes of sexual awakening and the dangers that surround it (Orenstein, 2002, p. 4). When the oral tales of peasants were collected and printed, they were also sanitised, a little at first and then much more later - to make them more acceptable to reading audiences. One of the most famous early literary versions is Charles Perrault's, published in 1697, and the earliest known published literary version of the tale (Darnton, 1984, p. 16).

The story begins with the classic phrase 'Once upon a time' and the girl is described to be the most beautiful girl her village had ever seen. Her mother and her grandmother cared and provided for her (Zipes, 1993, p. xi). Even though the story is very violent and sexualised, there is some sense of family and solidarity between women, as she grew up in a household of women who take care of each other. This is the version where the red hood is introduced. A woman sews her a red hood which she wears all the time and people begin calling her 'Little Red Riding Hood'. Her mother asks her to go and visit her grandmother because she is not feeling well and asks her to bring her biscuits and butter. Little Red Riding Hood begins her journey to see her grandmother and runs into the wolf on her way. The wolf asks her where she is going and she tells him that she is going to see her grandmother. The wolf wants to eat her there and then, but feels he cannot as there are men working in the forest. He tells her that they will go on together but take different paths (Zipes, 1993, p. 91). In this version Perrault is more descriptive and adds more body to the story than was the case in the original oral tale. For example, he describes Little Red Riding Hood collecting nuts and flowers as well as chasing butterflies on her way to her grandmother's house. The text suggests youth and innocence, whilst also showing that this untouched innocence is about to get taken away from her. The wolf gets there before her and pretends to be Little Red Riding Hood when he knocks on the grandmother's door. Once inside, he eats the grandmother. After that he gets into bed and pretends to be Little Red's sick grandmother. The girl knocks on the door and the wolf responds. Shocked by the sound of her grandmother's voice, the girl is afraid for a moment but then thinks to herself that she sounds like that because she is ill (Zipes, 1993, p. 92). Once inside, the wolf tells her to put the biscuits and butter down, get undressed and come lay next to him (Zipes, 1993, p. 93). In this version there is less emphasis put on the process of her getting undressed in front of the wolf. However the suggestion is still there, she needs to be naked before getting in bed with the wolf therefore still sexualising her as well as putting a sense of importance on her beauty in the

story. There is a strong emphasis in this version on the girl losing her innocence. There is a stark contrast between the events in the grandmother's house, where the girl is violated in a place she is meant to feel safe, contrasting with the scene where she is running around chasing butterflies and picking flowers. Once Little Red Riding Hood is in bed, she begins asking the famous questions concerning the wolf's physique and the strange way he looks. The first question is about his arms which he tells her are to give her better hugs, the next about the size of his legs, to run better, his ears, to hear better, his eyes, to be able to see her better and finally she comments on the size of his teeth to which he responds "to better eat you" (Zipes, 1993, p. 93). The questions about his big arms and strong legs, play into the stereotype of the strong muscular dominant man, almost describing these features as attractive. There is an insinuation that he is physically a lot stronger and bigger so she has no chance of surviving. The wolf then proceeds to jump on top of her and eat her (Zipes, 1993, p. 93). The act of him jumping on top of her before eating her excerpts his sense of power and dominance over her as she is helpless beneath

him. The tale still deals with sexual violence, but for the first time the tale focuses on the loss of innocence.



Fig 1. Little Red Riding-Hood, Austen, 1920

One of the interesting aspects of the story is the way symbols are added to it over time; the red hood and the huntsmen for example. The nature of symbolism is something that has been explored in depth in modern literary theory. Roland Barthes who looks at the nature of myth in his book 'Mythologies' suggests that myth is an agreed value in society and it is history and context that determines that value. As history changes Myth can be reinterpreted and seen in different ways depending on their new context (Barthes, 1993, p. 133). This idea of the nature of myth changing with context is highly relevant to the story of Little Red Riding Hood as the nature of the tale has changed over time and parts

of the story have taken on symbolic associations (for example the red hood has at times been associated with a girl going through puberty). Barthes takes his ideas from structuralism developed by Saussure, who explores the idea of the sign, the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the way a sign appears (a word, image or sound) and the signified is the meaning associated with it (Holdcroft, 1991, p. 53). As an example a rose is a signifier but its associations with love is the signified. The reason this is important is that it shows that meaning can be arbitrary, and as Barthes explains, that the arbitrary meaning is dependent on history and context. In the case of Little Red Riding Hood, versions have changed to suit the different audiences, and the power and purpose of the symbols with it.

A later, more widely known version of the story is written by the Grimm brothers. In this version of the story she is once again well loved by everyone who knows her, especially her grandmother. In this version her grandmother makes her a velvet red cap that she wears all the time and is known as 'Little Red Cap'. One day her mother asks her to bring her grandmother some cake and wine as she is not feeling well and this would make her feel better (Brothers Grimm, 1997, p. 139). In this version there is also a sense of community with groups of women taking care of each other. Her mother warns her to be careful and not stray from the route set out for her (Brothers Grimm, 1997, p. 139). In the contrary, there is no warning from her mother in Perrault's story. In the Brothers Grimm's version, the idea that it can be dangerous for girls to go out on their own and therefore they need to be careful is woven through the narrative, demonstrating how the oral story has progressed and changed over time. Little Red tells her mother that she will be very careful. While on her way to her grandmother who lives in the woods, she runs into the wolf. She has no idea of his intentions, so she is not afraid of him. The wolf begins to speak to her and asks her where she's going. She responds that she is going to her grandmother's house. He asks her what is in her apron as well as where her grandmother lives and she responds that she has wine and cake and tells him where her grandmother lives by describing the trees around it. The wolf strategically considers what would be the best way, not only to eat the little girl, but the grandmother too, so he walks along with Little Red Cap for a little while then distracts her by telling her to look at the flowers around her and listen to the sounds of the birds singing. She decides that she will pick some flowers for her grandmother. Whilst she is distracted, the wolf runs to the grandmother's house and gets there first (Brothers Grimm, 1997, p. 140). The grandmother responds and asks who's there and the wolf tells her he is Little Red Cap.

The grandmother tells him he can come in, and as soon as he is in the house, he jumps on top of the grandmother and eats her. He then gets dressed in the grandmother's clothes and lays where she was (Brothers Grimm, 1997, p. 141). When Little Red Cap gets to her grandmother's house she is shocked to find the door open. She walks in, feels strange and cannot figure out what is happening. She says hello to her grandmother but does not get a response. She notices that her grandmother looks very different (Brothers Grimm's, 1997, p. 142). Little Red Riding Hood in this version has more awareness of the strangeness of the situation, which makes her appear less naive than in previous versions of the story. Then she begins to ask him the familiar questions on his appearance. She asks about his ears, to which he responds to hear her better, she then comments on how big his eyes are and he responds to see her better, she asks about how big his hands are and he says to give her better hugs and then she finally remarks how big his teeth are to which he responds to eat you better. Immediately he gets out of bed, rushes over to Little Red and eats her (Brothers Grimm, 1997, p. 142).



Fig 2. Grimm's Fairytales, Folkard, 1991

In this version of the story, a huntsman walks past the house and hears strange snoring that does not sound like it belongs to a human being. He goes into the house and sees the

wolf sleeping in the old woman's bed. He then goes to kill him, thinking that the wolf might have eaten her so he begins to cut open his stomach. He manages to get both the grandmother and Little Red Cap out of the wolf's stomach alive (Brothers Grimm's, 1997, p. 142). Little Red Cap quickly rushes away to get some rocks to put in the wolf's stomach so that when he awakes he would not be able to run away and would die. After this happens, Little Red Cap has a moment of self-reflection and remembers her mother's warnings and decides that she would be very careful from now on (Brothers Grimm, 1997, p. 143). This version is different in that she is not sexualised as she was in earlier versions (she does not get undressed in front of the wolf and she does not then get into bed with him naked before being eaten). This may well be because the audience of the time would no longer accept the more sexualised version but it is hard to know for sure. The story also has a clear moral message for the first time - that young girls should be careful. The story also introduces the figure of the huntsman. There is a possible implication here that Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother are weak and unable to protect themselves, needing the intervention of a strong male hero (the huntsman) to come and save them. It is interesting that they make no attempt to save themselves and are passive in the face of violence. Orenstein argues that the introduction of a huntsman brings the idea that a man who is considered 'good' can save women from dangerous scenarios (Orenstein, 2002, p. 5). These suggested gender roles and how they affect cultural norms are an issue in many fairytales, not just Little Red Riding Hood. When fairytales are told to children they create a belief systems about gender and how one might be perceived. Not only do these narratives affect how children themselves behave and how they behave towards others but also how they view and are viewed by others, as well as affecting their beliefs as they grow up when it comes to gender (Kuykendal and Sturm, 2007, p. 38). The characters portrayed in these stories are tools that children then use to define gender roles, creating 'myths' in Barthes sense of the word. The way that fairytales are told are very powerful in the development of a child's gender identity (Kuykendal and Sturm, 2007, p. 38).

We can see that as the story of Little Red Riding Hood evolved, different story tellers revisited issues of her sexuality, exploring themes around virginity, rape and a girl entering into woman hood. In the early oral tale, the main character takes her clothes off and gets into bed where she is killed (Orenstein, 2002, p. 4). Historically when a child is told a story, the characters and the way they are portrayed create an idea in their minds of what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man, creating an idea of what they should strive for. Children are told these stories from a very young age and, in those

moments, they start associating certain things with women and men. What children are surrounded with and what they are taught impacts how they see gender roles. One of the defining symbols of a woman in a fairy tale is her beauty, through the male gaze. In stories where men are the main characters, they are seen as strong, courageous and knowledgeable whereas the women (when they are the main characters) are just seen as beautiful. Traditionally the male hero in a fairytale picks the woman for her beauty and nothing else. This narrative is repeated time and time again, instilling this idea that women are rewarded for their beauty and nothing more (Parsons, 2004, p. 137). Not only do fairytales portray this idea that a woman must be beautiful to be valued but also that she must suffer before she can live 'happily ever after' (Parsons, 2004, p. 137). As Little Red Riding Hood has evolved over time, it fits these notions more and more – the beautiful innocent young girl saved by the strong male huntsman. However the narrative is also slowly changing. Even though in the Brothers Grimm version she is saved by a huntsman, she then takes it in her stride to make sure he never hurts anyone again by putting heavy rocks in his stomach to make sure that he dies there and then, demonstrating that she is starting to think of how she can protect herself.

Historically in fairytales, the protagonist is seen as the most beautiful girl in the story and is loved for it yet she is often not recognisable through her individual features. Story after story the prince mistakes her for someone else or is unable to recognise her without a symbol proving it is her. For example Cinderella's glass slipper, which only fits her. Cinderella not only has to go through the humiliating experience of the prince not recognising her, but she must then go through a preparation ritual for her uninteresting wedding, a genre of fairytales that folklorists call "the innocent persecuted heroine" (Orenstein, 2002, p. 141). There is also the idea that in fairytales women should not have opinions about what is happening; women are to be silent and not express how they feel, because that is the nature of a woman (Bottigheimer, 1987, p. 72). "These stories portray women as "weak, submissive, dependent, and self-sacrificing while men are powerful, active, and dominant" (Kuykendal and Sturm, 2007, p. 39). Fairy tales define women as beautiful objects, powerless to alter the events in their lives, while fairy tale men are powerful agents of their own destiny." (Kuykendal and Sturm, 2007, p. 39). When a woman has power or is clever she is usually considered to be an evil character and is often ugly. If a woman wants power and goes looking for it she is seen to be revolting. On the other hand, women who are powerful and considered good are not portrayed as human. When the female protagonist needs help, a fairy godmother or good fairy appears

to help her against evil real women, such as wicked stepmothers or evil queens. Female power in traditional fairytales is represented as unnatural. There is no sense of solidarity amongst the women within these stories, instead, good women are portrayed as submissive and the powerful women are evil. (Parsons, 2004, p. 138). In the traditional and older tales, these stereotypes constantly appear, embedding these norms in young girls' heads, giving both unrealistic expectation of beauty as well as discouraging girls to think for themselves and aim for anything more than being beautiful.

Another very harmful theme in fairytales is the way a woman's murder is glamorised, and her murder used as a sexual metaphor (Orenstein, 2002, p. 142). In Little Red Riding Hood, she is eaten alive. As the poet Sexton says, there is no gruesomeness around the corpse of the dead women – they still remain perfect. This makes the idea of the 'glorious victim' heroic for young girls. When it comes to analysing Little Red Riding Hood from a feminist perspective, Susan Brownmiller shows that girls are fed this idea of the glorious victim even before they are able to read (Orenstein, 2002, p. 144). Traditional fairytales are woven with warnings of complex perils awaiting the female characters. An Innocent, feminine Little Red Riding Hood is on her way to visit her grandmother. The wolf hides in the forest waiting to ambush her and lead her astray. It is clear in the story that both Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother are equally powerless against the wolf, making him strong and manipulative. The wolf is able to kill both the grandmother and her granddaughter with ease. Orenstein describes Red Riding Hood as a parable of rape (Orenstein, 2002, p. 145). There are men in the forest who are called wolves and women who are powerless in their presence. Brownmiller suggests that the ideas of rape explored in Little Red Riding Hood have permeated society and she even links these to notions of power dynamics and the narration of rapes in prison (Orenstein, 2002, p. 145).

In more contemporary versions of the story, Little Red Riding Hood finds her own clever way of saving herself by either carrying a weapon or tricking the wolf (Orenstein, 2002, p. 5). This shows that, as society has progressed and the role of women have changed, these changes are being reflected in the stories themselves. It could be argued that feminist writers and artists are taking back the tales and reassembling them for an age that recognises female empowerment.

Alexander McQueen was a fashion designer and modern storyteller who played with old symbols from traditional tales and used them in new ways. He told tales through his

shows, both in the clothing and the staging, using music and props to help paint a picture of what the collection was about. He was loved and widely known for creating avant-garde pieces that make people stop and think about the ideas behind them (Moon and Nicewonger, 2011, p. 101). “He was the industry’s aptly named *l’enfant terrible*, a visionary who never lost his sense of child-like wonder and curiosity” (Knox, 2010, p. 7). McQueen knew from a very young age that he was gay and his father rejected him for it. He grew up encompassed in his mother’s strength; she believed in him. He spent his childhood wanting to design clothes for women. The fact that he was raised by strong women made him want to create collections that empowered them (Knox, 2010, p. 7). Aspects of one of his collections called ‘The Girl Who Lived in The Tree’ in 2008 relates to Little Red Riding Hood and images of girls in fairytales.

This collection and runway show is a fairytale of sorts. The story begins with the girl in the tree, with her crazy hair and wildness represented with clothes that embody a ‘punk princess’ aesthetic (Gleason, 2012, p. 179). The models are dressed in slim cut jackets, held tight with corset tops and paired with ballerina skirts creating that punk feel. On the runway sits a massive tree, reminiscent of the designer’s 600 year old elm tree, that seems to be covered in different fabrics. It gives a sense of place to the story he is telling. In the first half of the show the tree glows in a blue hue (V&A, 2023). He also creates atmosphere through music appealing to more than one sense, and thus creating a sensory experience (sight and sound). This way he makes the audience feel as if they themselves are immersed within the story. As the models begin walking down the runway and making their way around this significant tree the song ‘Come As You Are,’ by Nirvana played by an orchestra fills the runway (V&A, 2023). Cobain, one of the members of the band, stated that, in his eyes, the song was about people and how people can be themselves around strangers as long as they are kind and authentic in who they are. Musician and Producer Butch Vig added ‘Come As You Are’ is an ode to accepting someone for who they are.” (Harper, 2023).

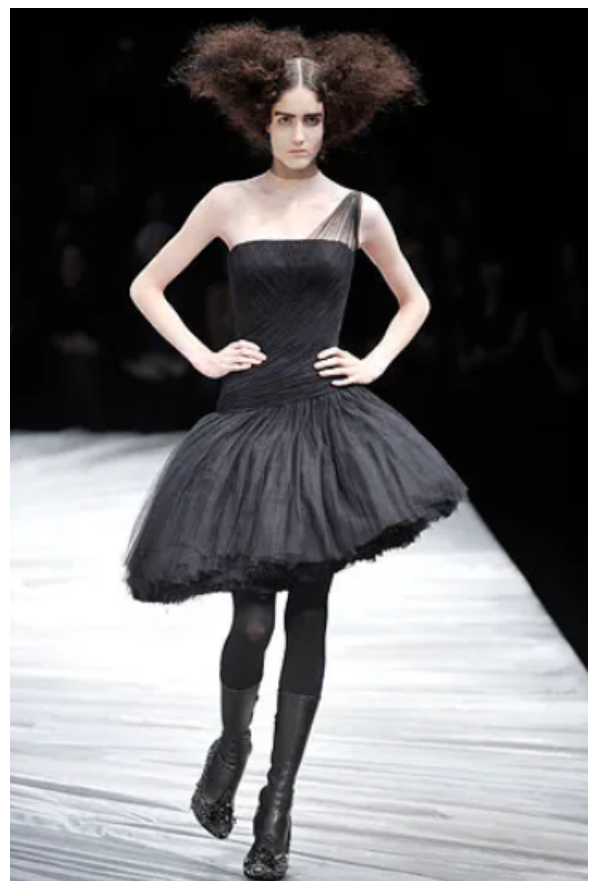


Fig 3. The Girl Who Lived in The Tree, McQueen, 2008

This gives the sense that women can be their real selves rather than the stereotypes depicted in traditional fairy tales.

In this first stage of the show the colour palette is very dark and sombre with the occasional sparkle (McQueen, 2008). One dress has a beautiful print of the elm tree done in a silver colour over a black dress as seen in fig 4 (McQueen, 2008). This suggests how central the tree is to the story he is telling and the importance of this elm tree to the girl. The tree has been there for her and witnessed different stages of her life. It has been there as the seasons change and as the girl changes. The tree gives the idea that the changes are natural, whereas female sexuality is problematic in many traditional tales. Having the tree there is also a representation of time and knowledge. This tree has been around for 600 years and it has seen society change over centuries. There is another dress that looks as if it is made with a thicker warmer material with a hood and snowflakes of different sizes that look as if they are moving up the dress (McQueen, 2008), another reminder of the passing seasons. There is also a look with an incredible skeletal headpiece that resembles a dead bird. The first half of the show closes with a model wearing a cream tulle dress with 2 peacocks at the front, facing each other portraying this idea of a potential romance. This dress represents the part of the story where the girl comes down from the tree onto the ground for the first time (Gleason, 2012, p. 181).

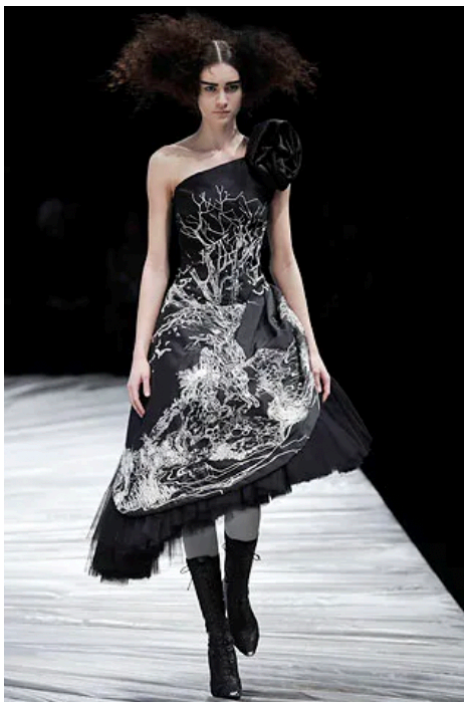


Fig 4. The Girl Who Lived in The Tree, McQueen, 2008



Fig 5. The Girl Who Lived in The Tree, McQueen, 2008

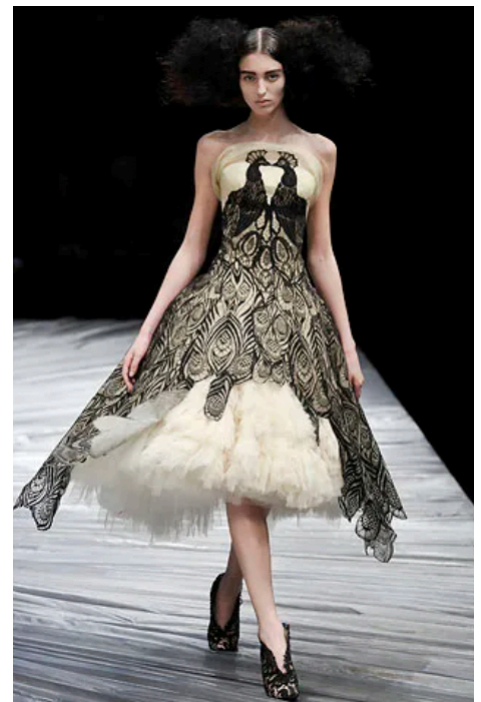


Fig 6. The Girl Who Lived in The Tree, McQueen, 2008

Mid-show the runway is empty and the tree begins to change colour, transforming from a cool toned blue to a warmer golden yellow. The tree is representative not only of the changing seasons but also the transition from girlhood to womanhood. This creates the idea of a sense of time passing both seasonally but also within the girl depicted in the tree's colour changes. The tree goes from blue cooler tones, representing when she was living in the tree and she was wild and wearing rags, to yellow which is when she marries the prince and is surrounded by the riches of royalty. The first model walks out covered in jewels with a headpiece, accompanied by a white tulle dress, with a red jacket over the top with gold jewels stitched onto it (McQueen, 2008). This part of the show portrays the girl meeting the prince, marrying him and experiencing the riches that come with being a part of his world (V&A, 2023). McQueen is changing the narrative again here. In many traditional tales, like Cinderella, the dream is to be married, which is a passive position, while in McQueen's fairytales the women are empowered. (Parsons, 2004, p. 137). In a fairytale, marrying the prince is seen as a reward for beauty and suffering. These types of storylines have messages fixed within them, telling young girls that in order to be happy in life they need to be passive and desired things (Parsons, 2004, p. 137). The male leads go on adventures and are rewarded for their bravery, whereas for women their singular ambition is to marry the prince (Orenstein, 2002, p. 141). In McQueen's tale the woman is in control and not the passive heroine to be saved. This is made very clear from the start with the punk image.



Fig 7. The Girl Who Lived in The Tree, McQueen, 2008



Fig 8. The Girl Who Lived in The Tree, McQueen, 2008

As the show unfolds, the models wear very little makeup and their hair is more tamed and slick (as opposed to the wild and free hair of the earlier segment). All the models arrive, one by one, in these ornamental dresses, incorporating manipulated tulle, crystals and gems, with some of the looks again creating a very tight slim silhouette using corset tops that sit above flouncy tulle skirts. The majority incorporate the colour red somewhere within the look and some use yellow as well. There is a very regal essence and military references in all of these outfits with the use of colour, forms, and the use of expensive gems and gold creating a sense of wealth (V&A, 2023).



Fig 9. The Girl Who Lived in The Tree, McQueen, 2008

The show closes with a model who walks out in a majestic red cape/coat over the top of a simple white dress with jewels embedded at the top and a very over the top headpiece covered in jewels and crystals. This look symbolises her transition into a queen (Gleason,

2012, p. 184). This look is reminiscent of Little Red Riding Hood with the rich red colour and the way it encompasses her body. Alexander McQueen is spinning and changing the narrative of traditional fairytales. With this collection, he is empowering women, dressing them in jewels and rich velvets and dressing them in regal clothes with the strong powerful red colour. He wanted them to not only to look like queens but to feel so empowered that they feel like queens. He wanted to celebrate women for how amazing they are and stray away from this notion of viewing them as solely beautiful, but instead making them beautiful and powerful. Red is an empowering colour here, in contrast to the way it is used in more traditional Little Red Riding Hood tales. It is a colour that symbolises power and wealth. Red is also a colour associated with luxury and royals (St. Claire, 2012, p.136). Within his collection and the runway show, he is saying that women deserve riches and to feel powerful. There was barely any mention of any men in the story. The girls journey through her life is done alone and she reached her final destination on her own. The last look feels as if Little Red Riding Hood is reborn as a strong and powerful woman.



Fig 10. The Girl Who Lived in The Tree, McQueen, 2008

Alexander McQueen gives us an example of how traditional fairytales can be retold by designers for a modern audience. Fairytales are full of symbols that are familiar to us all and packed with meaning developed over time - symbols such as glass slippers, red hoods and sleeping princesses. The oldest known tales of Little Red Riding Hood were highly violent and sexualised, reflecting a world that was much more violent than our world today. As the tale developed, the violence was toned down and the symbols we all know now, like the red hood, were introduced. These tales were used to promote gender

roles of passive beautiful women and powerful men who protect them (such as the huntsman). In the modern world, these old tales have been re-explored and subverted to reflect new feminist narratives. Modern designers are subverting the old symbols, using them in new ways to promote the empowerment of women.

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