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“Careful the Things You Say”: Meaning, Language, Woods, and Words in Sondheim’s *Into the Woods*

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“There’s something about the woods” (Sondheim & Lapine 74). These words are spoken when the magical properties of *Into the Woods*’ titular woods are realized. The journey through the woods symbolizes change, but these woods have more than just a symbolic impact on character development. As the characters of *Into the Woods* change in these woods, so do their words. With music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and a book by James Lapine, *Into the Woods* is the musical fable of a childless baker and his wife on a quest through the woods to break a family curse, their interactions with several fairy tale characters, and the consequences of wishes (Sondheim 57). Sondheim infuses his lyrics with linguistic concepts such as pragmatics, code switching, social meaning, and registers of speech to turn the woods into a metaphor for the process of language acquisition. Sondheim plays with phonological, morphological, and syntactical traits to give his characters defined sociolinguistic characteristics, which evolve as they intermingle and are influenced by the strange environment of the woods, demonstrating the productivity and the force of language.

Sondheim and his collaborator James Lapine weave together famous fairy tales to create a contemporary fable based on the complex metaphor of life as journey that pervades folktale and fairy tales across many cultures. In these tales, “a purposeful life becomes a journey in which life goals are destinations... difficulties in life are impediments to travel... and material resources and talents are provisions” (Herrero Ruiz 144). The characters in the musical set out on a journey that takes them into the woods, the “all-purpose symbol of the unconscious, the womb, the past, the dark place where we face our trials and emerge wiser or

destroyed” (Sondheim 58). Accessing the cross-cultural pervasiveness of fairy tales, Sondheim and Lapine center their fable around contemporary characters in which the audience can recognize themselves (Herrero Ruiz 138; Sondheim 58).

Just as conceptual metaphors in fairy tales transmit commonplace knowledge to the reader, Sondheim and Lapine are using the structure of the fable and the poetic function of musical theatre to transmit ideas about meaning to the audience. Deirdre Wilson, British linguist, states that “an author may be simultaneously performing acts of communication on two different levels: a lower-level act of describing a fictional world, and a higher-level act of showing this world to the reader as an example of what is possible, or conceivable” (qtd. in Bennett 150). Sondheim’s lyrics operate on multiple levels of referential meaning, as fictional utterances within the world of the play and as utterances outside the world of the play – to the audience (Bennett 149). Dramatizing this imaginary fantasy world as a musical expands the expressiveness of language, turning the lyrics into “an unmediated, authentic, primitive language that could “say” all that words could not” (qtd. in Symonds 247). For instance, Cinderella and Rapunzel use the long open vowel sound /a/, making exclamatory sighs which convey a wealth of inward emotion, written lyrically as “Ahhh...” or “Ah Ah-ah ah ah-ah ah.” Language is “at the limit of its resources, at a barrier where conventional words are powerless to express what goes on in the hearts of the characters” (Cor 37). Cinderella’s Prince alludes to this later in “Agony,” being moved “beyond power of speech” (Sondheim & Lapine 63).

As the characters journey through the woods, their interactions result in noticeable linguistic consequences;

“You’ve changed... you’re different in the woods,” the Baker’s Wife says (Sondheim & Lapine 73). Included among these linguistic changes, characters assign new referential meanings to words, new words enter their lexicon, or the phonetic characteristics of their utterances shift and expand. For instance, in the lyrics of “Maybe They’re Magic,” after establishing the gradable semantic properties – the range of comparative or superlative words related to the elements of meaning that make up the lexical entry of a word in the speaker’s mind – found in “rights and wrongs and in-betweens,” the Baker’s Wife proclaims that “if the end is right / it justifies / the beans” (Rowe & Levine 153, 401; Sondheim & Lapine 37-38). The Baker’s Wife has created an anomalous utterance that presupposes her meaning of the commonly understood phrase justifies the means. Her time in the woods has allowed her to break idiomatic convention by using a minimal pair – two words “that differ in meaning, contain the same number of sound segments, and display only one phonetic difference” at the same place in the word – to expand the semantic properties of the words (Rowe & Levine 399). This emboldens the Baker to reconsider the referential meaning of cloak just moments later in “Baker’s Reprise.” He states, “What’s a cloak? / It’s a joke... and a cloak is what you make it” as he resolves to steal the cloak from Little Red Ridinghood (Sondheim & Lapine 41).

Little Red Ridinghood and the Wolf’s discourse in the lyrics of “Hello, Little Girl” explores the mystifying influence the woods have on lexical semantics – the meaning of words (Rowe and Levine 398). The Wolf confides his gourmandizing intentions to the audience, describing Little Red as flesh, plump, tender, fresh, lush, and delicious. Intending to describe her in gastronomical terms, these words are also loaded with sexual connotations. As The Wolf crosses referents, his speech patterns take on an undulating, circular rhythm that hints at the sensuality of his language while indicating a need to restrain his carnal appetite. The stress pattern on the phonemes in “Think of that scrumptious carnality / twice in one...” fall on the first phoneme in a three-syllable pattern, generating

a hypnotic rhythm which breaks free on “... day!” (Sondheim & Lapine 30). Unable to fully express meaning with his befuddled linguistic competence, his speech concludes that “There’s no possible way / to describe what you feel.” He is trying to break out of the three-syllable pattern, like a broken record trying to stop skipping. He concludes, saying “when you’re talking to your meal,” finally able to accurately convey his referential meaning to himself and the audience.

In addition to this expansion of semantic complexity, the Wolf’s speech affects Little Red’s lexical characteristics and the frequency of certain phonemes. The Wolf speaks to Little Red with vowel sounds such as /ʌ/, /oo/ and /aʊ/, all back vowels, in words such as rush, slow, flowers, and hours. The sounds are sensual in nature, while onomatopoeically mimicking a wolf’s call. In contrast, Little Red uses the short clipped front vowel /ɛ/ in said, ahead, and misled with a tick-tocking rhythm. The wolf charms Little Red by copying her front vowel sounds, using the front /i/ sound in sweetly and fleetly. When mimicry doesn’t convince Little Red, the Wolf switches to the mocking nasal consonants of exploring, boring, and ignoring. These sounds surprise Little Red into considering the Wolf’s proposition. The next time Little Red speaks, back vowels in suppose, might like, and bouquet alternate with her front vowel sounds in stray and delay. She has agreed to a small delay, stopping to pick flowers for Granny.

The minor differences shown in the two Prince’s characterizations elicit sociolinguistic analysis – the study of how language and social factors are related – that reveals them to be basically the same man and provides commentary on the genericness of the fairy tale prince (Rowe & Levine 402). Their similarities are highlighted when they are seen together for the first time in “First Midnight.” They utter the same idiomatic phrase, “The harder to get, the better to have...” as if they share a lexicon (Sondheim & Lapine 52). Surprised by their similarity, Cinderella’s Prince confirms their shared identity by asking, “Agreed?”, to which Rapunzel’s Prince responds using the same word, going no further into their shared lexicon, only changing the sentence type from interrogative to declarative. The effect that

the two Princes' elite social class has on their use of language is explored in the lyrics of "Agony." They share the same level of formality in phrase structure. For instance, Cinderella's Prince says, "If I should lose her / how shall I regain..." and Rapunzel's Prince says, "You know nothing of madness" (Sondheim & Lapine 63, 65). Their lyrics often go out of the way to rearrange the syntax to put emphasis on themselves through movement transformation and topicalization, such as "the heart she has won from me," implying that they prefer to focus on themselves. Passive voice is used to grammatically rearrange the constituents to position themselves as the subject of sentences. They conclude the song, singing together, "I must have her to wife," employing a rarely used verb form of wife (Sondheim & Lapine 65; "Wife," def. 3). Their particularly formal use of language sets them apart from the other characters, making them appear buffoonish and distantly removed from the realities of this world. Combined with the sameness evidenced by their linguistic traits, their pompous self-absorption and archaic verbiage lampoons the sociolinguistic traditions of the fairy tale prince.

Cinderella is particularly concerned with defining the traits of her Prince, though since she is a peasant, she does not have a wide lexicon; applying the concept of linguistic relativity – that "people of different cultures think and behave differently because the languages they speak influence them to do so" – to her worldview suggests that her inability to fully articulate what she wants might structure her initial decisions in the woods (Rowe & Levine 223). When she first appears in "Act I Opening, Part 3," she is repeating a mantra that indicates a synonymous, simple relationship with her words, "So be Nice, Cinderella / Good, Cinderella / Nice good good nice..." (Sondheim & Lapine 11). Later, in "A Very Nice Prince," she continues this pattern of unmarked word choices, describing the Prince and the ball as nice, adding only the adjective very as a descriptor. Though the Baker's Wife presses for more information, she says "I don't meet a wide range / and it's all very strange" (Sondheim & Lapine 50). She doesn't have words to describe the ball or the behavior of the prince. Since

the Baker's Wife and Cinderella both come from the same sociological class, they are unable to expand each other's meaning. Later, after repeated adventures at the ball throughout her journey in the woods, she becomes quite descriptive in "On the Steps of the Palace." Nice becomes smart, saying "He's a very smart prince," and she goes on to describe many more qualities of the Prince and her experience at the ball (Sondheim & Lapine 86). Announcing that "you've learned something, too, / something you never knew," she has acquired new meaning during her time on the steps of the palace and expanded her understanding of the semantic properties of princeness (Sondheim & Lapine 87).

During "Giants in the Sky," Jack marvels at "know[ing] things now that [he] never knew before" while illustrating the anomalous and contradictory possibilities of a word's semantic properties (Sondheim & Lapine 57). Jack recounts his experience with the giants, at first explicating the semantic properties with adjectives such as big, tall, and terrible. By the end of his tale, he includes adjectives that would have been considered anomalous prior to his experience, now stating that "there are big tall terrible awesome scary wonderful giants in the sky" (57). The sentences could be synonymous now that the semantic properties of giantness have been expanded. And the order of the words is important, considering the scope of adjectives regarding structural semantics. By placing wonderful immediately before the noun, the audience can infer that all giants contain something wonderful about them. From the audience's perspective, knowing these things may also contain a sexual connotation. Sondheim surprises the audience when he reveals that the giant that Jack discusses is a lady giant, and Jack goes on to mention the nurture he receives from her which begins to awaken him to those things he "never knew before." Recapping her experience with the wolf, Little Red demonstrates her expanded lexicon and echoes Jack's acquisition of new meaning by saying, "And I know things now, / many valuable things, / that I hadn't known before" in "I Know Things Now" (Sondheim & Lapine 44). Little Red has also experienced an awakening of sorts through her exposure to the Wolf

in “Hello, Little Girl.” As previously mentioned, the Wolf’s words contain affective meaning that conveys sensuality and carnal desire. But Little Red Ridinghood has not learned to associate those words with this affective meaning, understanding them simply for their more referential meanings. After the near-death encounter with the Wolf, Little Red alludes to acquiring a deeper understanding in “I Know Things Now.” She uses the words excited and scared interchangeably, even remarking on their interchangeability, saying “he made me feel excited, / well, excited and scared” and “I really got scared, / well, excited and scared” (44). She realizes that “though scary is exciting / nice is different than good” (45). In the woods, these characters are questioning their understanding of the meanings of things, demonstrating the productive nature of language by producing and comprehending utterances they “hadn’t known before.” While the characters expand their linguistic competence, the linguistic ambiguity allows the audience to infer alternate connotations in the words.

But there is a limit to how far the characters can change, as dictated by the hypothesis of linguistic determinism and seen in the interaction between Cinderella’s Prince and the Baker’s Wife. As defined in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Supplement to Relativism, the strong version of linguistic relativity suggests that “our thought is ‘at the mercy’ of our language ... we are ‘compelled’ to read certain features into the world” (qtd. in Rowe & Levine 225). In “Any Moment,” the cultural differences between the two are stated directly by the Prince in his seduction of her. He states, “Life is often so unpleasant, / you must know that as a peasant” trying to convince her to indulge in the moment, when “right and wrong don’t matter” (Sondheim & Lapine 148) As if to demonstrate the polysemous nature of a moment, that it could be both luxuriated in and cut short, almost immediately the Prince has to leave, explaining that “this was just a moment in the woods” (150). He leaves stating “every moment is of moment / when you’re in the woods,” where moment refers to both a very brief period of time and noted importance. The Prince’s use of the formal definition further demonstrates the

cultural differences between the two. Their language is inconsistent, they do not match, which the Baker’s Wife acknowledges by repeating that she is “in the wrong story” (147). She blames this dalliance on the woods:

Must it all be either less or more

Either plain or grand?

Is it always “or”?

Is it never “and”?

That’s what woods are for:

For those moments in the woods... (Sondheim & Lapine 152)

The Baker’s Wife plays with the idea of antonyms as complementary pairs to illustrate how the woods are a space in which things change; it has the power to alter a person’s point of view and reveal deeper meaning, much like new words have the power to alter and add meaning to the social world of the speaker. The magical power contained in the woods is synonymous with the transformative power of language. She chooses to return to her regular life with the “or meaning more than it did before,” acknowledging the danger involved in such learning (153).

This danger is explicitly cautioned in the Witch’s stanza of “Act II Finale.” “Careful the things you say, / children will listen,” she says to the audience (Sondheim & Lapine 185). Rowe and Levine point out that in many cultures, warning children to “watch what they say” demonstrates “awareness of the power of the spoken word to change the social environment” (Rowe & Levine 168). Sondheim is instructing the audience to choose their words carefully. The lyrics allude to the process of language acquisition and indicate an understanding of the theory of linguistic relativity, that people think and behave based on the influence of the language they speak (Rowe & Levine 223). “Children will see / and learn,” the witch continues (Sondheim & Lapine 185). The lexicon of a culture reinforces what that culture knows about itself. The witch is also reinforcing these pragmatic concepts of social meaning, affective meaning, and maxims of speech. Words must be carefully selected, as they can carry many meanings depending on many contextual situations. The chorus adds to the Witch’s speech act, adding that the audience

should consider the power of language beyond its impact on children, expanding “past what you can see” (186).

Sondheim broadens the transformative power of the woods to include the audience’s ability to grasp the transformative power of language. Laurence Cor, author of “Phonic Aspects of Language in the Theater,” suggests that “on the stage, the symbols... are psychological stimuli. Language, no longer simply a vehicle of ideas, becomes a sensory phenomenon... and may even recreate the synaesthetic [sic] values of words that children tend to appreciate” (Cor 39). The audience is engaged in a discourse with the chorus, challenging them to be more aware of their use of language: “Though it’s deep, / though it’s dark /... You have to listen / you can’t just act, / you have to think” (Sondheim & Lapine 186). Because Sondheim has so discreetly instructed the audience to listen carefully and look for the deeper meaning, the audience can see beyond the referential meaning of the characters’ words and start to expand their understanding for implied shades of meaning.

The poetic function is a constant presence in theatrical utterances, though some are more hidden than others (Jasna 156). The giants that Jack spoke of in “Giants in the Sky” take on deeper meaning, as the audience considers the many giants that they may come up against in life. The fact that Jack tells his story in second-person perspective, summarizing that “you think of all of the things you’ve seen... and you’re back again only different than before / after the sky,” demands that the audience reconsider the metaphorical giants which they may encounter on their personal journeys (Sondheim & Lapine 57). This reconnects to the conceptual metaphors found in fairy tales, where the final goal is reached after encountering dangers beyond physical heights and a great distance away (Herrero Ruiz 146).

As the musical nears its finale, Sondheim challenges his characters and his audience to persevere through a myriad of potential obstacles, both linguistic and personal. In “No More,” the Baker has had enough of

the anomalous utterances of the Mysterious Man. “We die but we don’t,” says the Mysterious Man, prompting the Baker to demand “No more riddles,” trying to give up on the linguistic challenges imposed by the world of the woods (Sondheim & Lapine 167-168). But by continuing to engage with the complexities, he solves the Mysterious Man’s riddle, realizing his familial connection and galvanizing an end to his self-defeating inclination. He sings “No more giants / waging war ... how do you ignore / all the witches / all the curses / all the wolves, all the lies...” asserting his conviction to take on the challenges that come his way (169). The audience inserts their own personal challenges in the referential position of giants, witches, curses, and wolves. The Baker refers to things within the world of the play; the audience is challenged with expanding the meaning of these words in the context of their own lives.

Sondheim’s lyrics imbued *Into the Woods*’ characters with defined sociolinguistic characteristics, which evolved through the journey, fulfilling a higher level of meaning that instructs the audience and demonstrates the communal evolution of language. Going together on the journey into the woods has produced new meaning for the characters and the audience. Sondheim challenges his audience to consider the impact their words and actions have on their community. It is a daunting proposition, but Sondheim assures the audience that things will come out alright, reminding the audience that “Witches can be right, / giants can be good... Just remember... someone is on your side... no one is alone” (Sondheim & Lapine 179). That’s what these fables and fairy tales are for, after all. Language continues to evolve, so be prepared to go on the journey and share your story.

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