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Abstract

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TEXTS FOR ANALYSIS

ACADEMIC PROSE

THE PHYLOGENY OF LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

Abstract

1 Researchers have long been fascinated by the strong continuities
evident in the oral traditions associated with different cultures.
According to the 'historic-geographic' school, it is possible
to classify similar tales into "international types" and trace
5 them back to their original archetypes. However, critics argue
that folktale traditions are fundamentally fluid, and that most
international types are artificial constructs. Here, these issues
are addressed using phylogenetic methods that were originally
developed to reconstruct evolutionary relationships among biological
10 species, and which have been recently applied to a range of cultural
phenomena. The study focuses on one of the most debated international
types in the literature: ATU 333, 'Little Red Riding Hood'.
A number of variants of ATU 333 have been recorded in European
oral traditions, and it has been suggested that the group may
15 include tales from other regions, including Africa and East Asia.
However, in many of these cases, it is difficult to differentiate
ATU 333 from another widespread international folktale, ATU 123,
'The Wolf and the Kids'. To shed more light on these relationships,

data on 58 folktales were analysed using cladistic, Bayesian and
20 phylogenetic network-based methods. The results demonstrate that,
contrary to the claims made by critics of the historic-geographic
approach, it is possible to identify ATU 333 and ATU 123 as distinct
international types. They further suggest that most of the African
tales can be classified as variants of ATU 123, while the East Asian
25 tales probably evolved by blending together elements of both ATU 333
and ATU 123. These findings demonstrate that phylogenetic methods
provide a powerful set of tools for testing hypotheses about cross-
cultural relationships among folktales, and point towards exciting
new directions for research into the transmission and evolution
30 of oral narratives.