

Articles

“All sorts of pitfalls and surprises”: Competing Views of Idealized Girlhood in Lewis Carroll’s Alice Books

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The opening and closing sections of Lewis Carroll’s two classic children’s novels, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass*, have posed perennial difficulties for critics. The prefatory poem and final paragraphs of *Wonderland*, as well as the poems and drawing-room scenes that frame the central narrative in *Looking-Glass*, are nostalgic, gently teasing, and ostensibly serene—and they stand in sharp contrast to Alice’s unsentimental, chaotic, and often violent adventures. Although this dichotomy has been interpreted in several ways, most critics agree that the framing sections give a much more conventionally idealized picture of Alice and her dream-journeys than the adventures do.¹ Such idealization is hardly surprising in light of Carroll’s legendary devotion to little girls, but in the context of Alice’s adventures, the frames *do* surprise. Their portrayals of her journeys through Wonderland and Looking-glass country bear so little resemblance to the journeys themselves that it is difficult to take the frames quite seriously. The closing paragraph of *Wonderland* is lovely but absurd as it blithely affirms that the tale of Alice’s adventures, in which mothers sing sadistic lullabies, babies turn into pigs, and little girls shout at queens, will lead Alice’s older sister into reveries about delightful children and domestic bliss. From a logical perspective, this final scene is as nonsensical as anything in Wonderland. I would like to suggest that the contrast between frames and adventures in the *Alice* books implies that the frames’ idealized visions of Alice are themselves constructed narratives, as fantastic in their own way as the dream-tales they so radically reinterpret.

The *Alice* frames encourage readers to interpret Alice’s adventures as fairy tales, a category that in nineteenth-century usage includes lit-

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erary and traditional tales, nonsense, and what we would now call fantasy fiction. In mid-Victorian discourse, fairy tales often exert a recognizably domestic influence on their readers or listeners. Contemporary periodical articles and reviews commonly portray the tales' virtues as analogous to an ideal home's: readers young and old will find their sympathies awakened and the corrosive effects of an amoral, competitive, and violent world lessened.² *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*, like many Victorian texts, thus characterize the values inscribed in idealized childhood and its tales as domestic and feminine. The *Wonderland* frames suggest that the tale of Alice's dream fosters the happy, loving childhood that will enable her development into a good woman and mother, while the *Looking-Glass* frames anticipate that the tale will create a domestic space powerful enough to keep the stormy world at bay.

In both novels, the contrast between frames and adventures works to undermine such hopes and suggestions by foregrounding potential conflicts between adult and child figures. Adult and child characters in the *Alice* books, as well as the implied readers, often want rather different things from one another; tale-telling both fulfills and frustrates their desires.³ In *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*, Carroll ultimately suggests that both adults and children want power as well as comfort, and that the domestic world of little girls and fairy tales is the unlikely site of power struggles over the comforts of home and childhood. Still, Carroll does not reject the ideals of fairy tales and femininity he so deftly ironizes. He may delight in exposing their illogic, but he remains deeply committed to their emotional power. As Carroll's fellow Oxford don T. B. Strong noted, *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* draw heavily on mid-Victorian mores, often taking common words or phrases literally and pressing conventional assumptions to their logical conclusions. The books reveal "all sorts of pitfalls and surprises round the ordinary course of conversation" (Strong 306). Paradoxically, "pitfalls and surprises" can make conventional forms all the more alluring; by implying that the idyllic world of little girls and their fairy tales is really a narrative told by adults for self-interested purposes, the *Alice* books only intensify adult readers' desire for those idealized visions.

The many Victorian critics who defend fairy tales as an indispensable part of middle-class childhood commonly invoke the innocent, vision-

ary child of Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode and then present fairy tales as a means of sustaining that child's happiness, innocence, and promise in later life.⁴ The critic Edward Dowden thus warns that children will retain their "beautiful soul[s]" only if they are given the proper reading matter: "the natural craving of a little child's mind is for romance. Supply it with mere facts and figures, and you starve it as effectually as if you offered a new-born infant a cask of sea-biscuits" (497, 501). In particular, these writers often assume that the tales will aid moral growth by delighting young readers. Joshua Fitch defends "fictions and tales of wonder" in the Methodist *London Quarterly Review* on the grounds that "childhood is a time of enjoyment, and the great object of books, toys, and such devices is, after all, to make the little ones *happy*" (483).⁵ Such happiness "is a necessity of the moral nature. . . . cheerfulness is the sunshine of the young soul; and in it all good and beautiful qualities are likely to thrive" (Fitch 483–84). Read against this background, the connection *Wonderland* draws between the dream-tale and "a merry crew" of children is more than mere sentimental nostalgia (*Wonderland* 21). This emphasis on the child auditors' enjoyment encourages readers to believe that the tale will have a beneficial influence on the girls' development.

The novel's closing paragraph, in which Alice's sister dreams of the girl's future, uses the tale to link a delightful childhood with domestic happiness. Focusing on the adult Alice's happy memories, this scene echoes the prefatory poem's request that she treasure the story as a remembrance of her "Childhood's dreams" (23). Memories of the original dream-tale will allow Alice to retain her child self even after she becomes a woman: she will "keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood . . . remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days" (164). This image of a serene mother who has never forgotten her childhood affirms the contemporary belief that an ideal woman retains a child's unselfconscious spontaneity and innocent affection. The sister's vision of Alice closely corresponds to John Ruskin's statement in *Sesame and Lilies* that "the perfect loveliness of a woman's countenance" combines "majestic peace, which is founded in the memory of happy and useful years . . . with that yet more majestic childishness, which is still full of change and promise" (106). The fact that the sister's dream evokes a delightful "little Alice" who then transforms into a serene adult reinforces this conception that the woman will retain the girl's virtues (162). At the same time, the sister's dream also implies that

Alice's development from girl to woman will be smooth and unconflicted.

The revisions Carroll made to his original manuscript when he decided to publish *Wonderland* suggest a deliberate attempt to appeal to the public by associating Alice's adventures with conventional ideas about femininity and fairy tales. Although the manuscript copy of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* that Carroll originally gave to Alice Liddell concludes with the sister's vision of an adult Alice, it does not include the prefatory poem or the portion of the sister's dream that focuses on the young Alice. Instead, the *Under Ground* dream begins with a reference to the boat trip on which Carroll first told his tale to the Liddell girls, invoking "another little Alice, who sat listening with bright eager eyes" to the dream-tale as her boat "went slowly gliding" along the river (89). The manuscript thus makes an appeal to Alice Liddell by including her in the story in her own proper person, distinct from the tale's Alice. *Wonderland*, on the other hand, omits this private reference and identifies the little girl "with bright eager eyes" as the fictional Alice, the same child who grows into such a serene woman in the sister's dream (162). By making this revision, Carroll positions the published version more firmly within established narratives of fairy tales' influence on girls' development.

Carroll's later addresses to readers and revisions to *Wonderland* only intensify the portrayal of nonsense as conducive to domestic happiness. Addresses such as the "Easter Greeting to Every Child who Loves Alice" are among the most widely ridiculed of all Carroll's writings, but they constitute an earnest appeal to the domestic and religious sentiments of many middle-class Victorians. By reiterating the common contemporary belief that children's "innocent laughter is as sweet in [God's] ears as" any hymn, the "Easter Greeting" works to assure readers that the tales of *Wonderland* and *Looking-glass country* are perfectly compatible with moral seriousness and domestic piety (249). Carroll's address "To All Child-Readers of 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'" presents the same theme in a less overtly religious form, envisioning readers who sit cozily at "English firesides" and prompting them to find the "truest kind of happiness" through sharing "innocent amusement" with others (247).

This attempt to fix Alice's adventures and their child readers ever more firmly within idealized domestic spaces culminates in *The Nursery Alice*, Carroll's revision of *Wonderland* for "Children aged from Naught to Five" (preface). In this version, Carroll eliminates *Wonderland's* fram-

ing sections altogether and heavily revises Alice's adventures. The parodies of children's verse disappear, as do the more antagonistic scenes between Alice and the Wonderland creatures. The Caterpillar no longer becomes angry at Alice, and the episode in which the dove calls her a serpent disappears entirely. Alice still kicks Bill the Lizard up the chimney, but it is "a little tiny kick" and the narrator quickly interjects, guiding the reader's responses away from aggression and toward sympathy: "Poor little Bill! Don't you pity him very much? How frightened he must have been!" (20). The earlier novel's shifting, dreamlike qualities also figure much less prominently in *The Nursery Alice*; the narrator carefully explains Alice's transformations and many of the creatures' motives. These revisions severely downplay the aggressive and unsettling aspects of *Wonderland*. The contrasts between the earlier novel's frames and adventures disappear: all the adventures of *The Nursery Alice* resemble the sweet, serene depictions in the *Wonderland* frames.⁶

Wonderland itself, however, has a more complex relationship to popular Victorian conceptions about feminized children and their tales. Even its frames subtly undercut the claim that good children's literature provides material for happy memories that influence child readers and inspire adults. These scenes portray fictions, not memories. Carroll's choice of words in the closing scene is characteristically precise; the sister "pictured" Alice's future as a mother, "dreamed about little Alice," and "half believed herself in Wonderland" (163–64). This reverie is only a dream, as the sister remains well aware. The prefatory poem also calls attention to itself as a literary object, with its carefully patterned verse form, wordplay, and conversion of little girls into the three Fates. It even casts some doubt on its own version of events: the sixth stanza, unlike the first five, asserts that the tale was "hammered out" over a period of time rather than being told in one "golden afternoon" (23, 21). Furthermore, neither the prefatory poem nor the closing scene goes so far as to show Alice as an adult who has accepted and been influenced by the tale; they simply leave open the reassuring possibility that these things could happen.

The prefatory poem and closing reverie domesticate Alice's chaotic adventures: Wonderland becomes a pastoral daydream or, as Sarah Gilead has put it, "a pleasant escapist fantasy" (282). Gilead argues that the frames misread the adventures (282), but in the context of contemporary views about children and their tales, these sections more closely resemble re-readings. Although the frames do imply that

the tale will help Alice grow into a woman who retains the best characteristics of her childhood, the contrast between frames and adventures indicates that the original dream-tale must be edited in order to produce this developmental narrative. Alice's experiences in Wonderland are mediated through the adult narrator who tells of her adventures, but they emphasize her reactions to the strange world around her. The frames, which introduce another level of adult mediation by including the sister and the prefatory poem's speaker, shift the center of attention away from Alice, concentrating instead on adults' reactions to her and her tale. The disjunction between the frames' placid visions and Alice's anger, frustration, and bewilderment in Wonderland calls attention to the differences between Alice's experiences and the desires of adult figures.⁷

The frames work to erase suggestions of tension between children and adults, imagining an idyllic world where adult control over children offers a foundation upon which both groups can satisfy their presumed desires. In the prefatory poem, the speaker's stories lead to reciprocal delight: by telling the tale, he gratifies his desire to amuse the children and their demand to be amused. Of course, the speaker pretends to be too weak to do anything but capitulate to the children's demands, yet this stance is all part of the game. The girls are well aware that he is only tantalizing them; his reluctance functions as an irresistible prelude to the story and gives further evidence of his narrative skill. At the same time, his claim of weakness masks the actual power imbalances between himself and his young listeners. The closing scene also downplays such imbalances by emphasizing reciprocal pleasure in the interactions between Alice and her older sister. After Alice relates her adventures, the sister drifts into a reverie about the girl's delight in telling the tale, and then into an inspiring dream about her possible future. Alice's cheerful obedience to her sister's request that she go in to tea also satisfies the adult's desire that tales amuse children while teaching them compliance (Gilead 282–83). Alice herself seems content with this arrangement; she will finally get the tea she had been denied in Wonderland.

The contrast between frames and adventures, however, suggests that conventional Victorian ideals of girlhood and its tales are deeply implicated in the very structures of domination and self-interest that they attempt to disavow. In *Wonderland*, the frames' depictions of innocent play, domestic happiness, and intergenerational harmony occur when adult figures exercise their power to dismiss the child and

retell her experiences in ways that correspond to their own conceptions about fairy tales and little girls. The frames may emphasize play and reciprocity, but they rest on adult power and self-interest. It is no accident that Alice's sister sends the girl in to tea before beginning her own reveries. Neither the sister nor the prefatory poem's speaker has any interest in understanding the more disturbing or rebellious aspects of Alice's adventures. On the contrary, the sister's musings emphasize the delights of this "strange tale" (164). Similarly, in keeping with the conventional stress on cheerful tales and innocently charming girls, Alice's generally uncomfortable and even hostile interactions with the Wonderland creatures become "friendly chat[s]" in the prefatory poem (23).

The adventures, for their part, act as amusing correctives to the frames, emphasizing conflicts between thoroughly self-interested child and adult figures. Alice's adventures thus work to satisfy two desires that the frames, in common with most nineteenth-century idealizations of fairy tales, are careful to disavow: the adult's desire to dominate children and the child's desire to resist that domination.⁸ The adventures draw upon and complicate an established nineteenth-century tactic of praising fairy tales by contrasting them with so-called moral and informational literature, which attempts to convey factual information or to mold the child's beliefs and behavior by means of precept and direct example. Although Romantic and Victorian devotees of fairy tales tend to define moral and informational literature loosely, they are quite certain about its effects on children who read too much of it. The young unfortunates will become self-interested, conceited monsters such as the Infant Prodigy of Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Bitzer in Dickens's *Hard Times*, or they will die of mental strain as do the children on Charles Kingsley's *Isle of Tomtoddis*. This strategy of contrasting fairy tales with moral and informational literature assumes a sharp dichotomy between the wise, benevolent adults who give their children fairy tales and the overbearing, foolish adults who press nothing but facts on them.⁹ Such a scenario admits the possibility of bullying adults and resistant children, yet disavows it as a sad consequence of ignorant pedagogy.

Alice's adventures, however, work to collapse distinctions between fairy tales and moral or informational children's literature. Alice is given a fairy tale whose parodies of poems such as Isaac Watts's "How Doth the Little Busy Bee" or Robert Southey's "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them" incorporate the standard attack on

other types of children's literature. Unlike most contemporary defenses of fairy tales, however, *Wonderland* does not assume clear divisions between the unfettered freedom of imaginative worlds and the tedium of tracts or primers. Nor does it necessarily offer Alice a joyous, comic world of free play.¹⁰ The frames do allow such a view of Wonderland, but the adventures themselves present Alice with a fantasy world that casts her as the child who must resist the domineering adult figures who supposedly populate moral or informational literature. When she enters Wonderland, Alice expects her experience to correspond to the frames' harmonious model of childhood and children's literature. She would like to be amused and is determined to get into the Queen of Hearts' garden, which she thinks will be a delightful world of "beds of bright flowers and . . . cool fountains" (30). She also would like to impress others with her learning and manners, even going so far as to practice a curtsy as she is falling down the rabbit hole. The creatures, however, are distinctly unimpressed. Many are disposed to dislike Alice, they rarely listen to her, and "instead of encouraging her to speak for herself they make her recite . . . prefabricated piece[s] of discourse" such as lessons and poems (Hancher 193). The creatures' behavior suggests a world more akin to caricatures of moral or informational literature than to conventional Victorian images of fairy tales. The ease with which these two categories of children's literature blend into one another implies that fairy tales are hardly free from conflicts of interest between overbearing adults and recalcitrant children.

Domestic order thus disappears in Wonderland: traditionally feminine spaces such as kitchens, croquet grounds, gardens, and tea-tables are infused with the contentious, competitive values that Victorian domestic ideology ostensibly relegates to the public sphere. In such a world, Alice can gain happiness only by being rebellious and calculating.¹¹ The adventures do draw upon contemporary associations between childhood and adult femininity: Alice often resembles older female characters such as the Duchess or the Queen of Hearts. In a neat comic reversal of Victorian conventions, however, the characteristics Alice shares with the Duchess and Queen are not self-denying love and service, but individualism and a will to power. She does emulate these figures, but the result is conflict rather than harmony, since each party attempts to satisfy her own interests at the expense of the other. Alice is extremely reluctant to accept the Duchess's supposedly friendly advice, given in the form of moral maxims. As Alice is well

aware, the Duchess's morals neither draw on nor encourage reciprocity between children and adults. Instead, they are products of an arbitrary and self-interested will to power. The Duchess's comment about minding one's own business rebukes Alice's concern about the pig-baby, and her later "moral" that "'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round" works to define her own familiar behavior toward the girl as love (80). The two morals contradict each other, of course, but consistency is not the point: both these sayings justify the Duchess's attempts to position Alice in subordinate roles. Understandably, Alice resists the Duchess's familiarity—and her morals.

Alice's wistful hope that she herself may become a Duchess suggests her own desire to gain power. It also prefigures her more dramatic challenge to the Queen of Hearts during the trial scene, in which Alice effectively, if only momentarily, takes on the Queen's role of a screaming, domineering woman.¹² For an instant, Alice assumes a position directly contrary to those prescribed by domestic ideology or ideals of girlhood. Instead of comforting adults or joyfully playing, Alice contradicts the King and screams at the Queen. The trial scene, perhaps more than any other part of *Wonderland*, breaks down distinctions between public and private, masculine and feminine, child and adult, nonsense rhymes and edifying poems. The Queen's fury is as childish as it is despotic, while the King is an infantilized, henpecked ruler who cannot quite tell the difference between "important" and "unimportant" (155). In her position as mother and wife as well as ruler, the Queen of Hearts embodies what Adrienne Munich has called a "particularly problematic" slippage between a sovereign's public power and a woman's private influence (265). This slippage is made even more acute by the trial itself; it parodies a traditional nursery rhyme in which the Knave of Hearts steals the Queen's tarts, is beaten for it, and promises never to steal again (Reichertz 8, 93–99). In *Wonderland*, this domestic, childish crime and punishment becomes a very public and ceremonious trial, complete with jurors—albeit incompetent ones—and a herald. The trial thus emphasizes the tensions between the Queen's public position as monarch and her private role of wife and mother: she intimidates her husband and threatens to execute her son. Not surprisingly, the nursery rhyme's clear moral disappears. No one present thinks to ask whether the charge of theft is true, and Alice's dream ends before the trial concludes.¹³

The trial's nonsense is comic, but also unsettling: it is a rather frightening farce. In *Wonderland*, power rests not with the rule of law as in

the ideal public realm, nor with the affections and conscience as in the ideal domestic realm, but with the individual who can dominate others most successfully. Kathleen Blake has suggested that Alice's experience in Wonderland resembles that of a participant in a competitive game whose rules are "adjusted constantly at the whim and to the advantage of the strongest player" (149). According to Blake, Alice's final challenge to the King and Queen of Hearts represents a rebellion against Wonderland's games: Alice destroys the frustrating game that has left her at a continual disadvantage (130–31). Alice's actions are certainly rebellious, but her anger seems directed against other players' attempts to dominate her rather than against the game itself. She denies the validity of the Queen's commands, refuses to obey them, and finally challenges the court's ability to rule at all, shouting, "Who cares for *you*? . . . You're nothing but a pack of cards!" (161). In challenging the King's "Rule Forty-Two" and the Queen's dictum of "Sentence first—verdict afterwards!" Alice openly embraces Wonderland's tactics, loudly declaring her status as the player powerful enough to create and enforce her own rules.

Alice's antidomestic outburst draws on and marks a transition back into the domestic, however. To a large extent, she is willing to assert her authority because she understands her own world's hierarchies well enough not to feel threatened by the playing-card King and Queen. Although her final assertion of power shatters the conventional mid-Victorian image of a loving, self-sacrificing girl, it does so by reasserting an ordinary domestic hierarchy in which girls do control inanimate objects such as playing cards. The chaotic trial scene thus encourages readers to hope that Alice will rebel against the King and Queen in order to reinstate order, a desire that Alice's waking ultimately fulfills. The abrupt shift from the trial to the closing scene, however, suggests that Wonderland's anarchy is less an outright reversal of contemporary idealizations of girlhood and domesticity than an exaggeration of tendencies already present within those ideals.

The logic of Wonderland, in which stronger players alter situations to their own advantage, continues in the closing scene as the adult narrator replaces chaotic nonsense with an idyllic tableau. If the final paragraphs are to reassert domestic order and intergenerational harmony, they must contain Alice's rebellion and bring her back into willing submission to loving adult figures. Immediately after her outburst, the narrator deflects Alice's rebellion and asserts his own control over tale and child, identifying her adventures as a dream and

characterizing her as a delightful girl who is happy to obey her indulgent and caring older sister. The final paragraphs, with their peaceful, gardenlike setting and evocation of Alice "lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister," reassert an idealized domestic hierarchy (162). The adult male narrator creates and controls the scene, the older sister takes on a maternal role as the narrator's agent in caring for Alice, and Alice herself figures as the affectionate, obedient girl who accepts adult guidance as she was singularly reluctant to do in the adventures.

Wonderland itself functions much as Alice's outburst during the trial scene does: it draws on, undermines, yet eventually intensifies the desire for idealized visions of childhood and domesticity. The ways in which Carroll exposes the intergenerational tensions that underlie and enable contemporary narratives about fairy tales and little girls is certainly subversive, but *Wonderland* as a whole works to contain those tensions and make them serve conventional ideals. The contrasting frames and adventures allow the text to satisfy its adult and child readers' presumed desires even as it reveals conflicts between them. Alice's adventures allow readers of all ages to indulge their fantasies of rebelling against unjust authority figures while defining themselves as children who only want to play in a garden and impress others. Along the way, adults and older children can share in Alice's pride at her supposed "knowledge" of big words and arcane facts—and satisfy their own sense of superiority by laughing at her mistakes. During the Knave's trial, for instance, the narrator inserts a nonsense definition of "suppressed by the officers of the court" that Alice takes quite seriously. The humor lies in the disjunction between Alice's complacent remark that she has read the term but "never understood what it meant till now" and the officers' method of suppressing the guinea pigs: pushing them head first into "a large canvas bag" and sitting on them (149–50). Readers who understand the joke gain the pleasure of seeing the world through a literal-minded child's eyes while using their own superior knowledge to see the humor in such a view.

Because the narrator's asides stress the limits of Alice's knowledge, they work to soften the impact of her rebellion by reminding readers that she is after all a very young girl. The frames also reaffirm conventional ideals of home and family. They soothe children who might wonder whether Alice will ever get home again and offer adult readers narratives that subsume aggressive impulses into a domestic space that proves able to accommodate them. The frames, then, are inte-

gral to Carroll's attempt at balancing an emotional attachment to idealized visions of fairy tales and little girls with an intellectual delight in exposing their illogicalities. These sections hint that contemporary ideals can be undercut by their own premises, but they also encourage readers to believe that stories such as *Wonderland* can fulfill and even reconcile the many desires that surround Victorian conceptions of childhood and its tales. The closing paragraph, in particular, delicately balances irony and idyll in its vision of Alice as queen of her children's hearts. On the one hand, it recalls what Carroll's contemporary Elizabeth Sewell termed the "training of the heart" (387): a girl should be prepared "to dwell in quiet homes . . . to exert a noiseless influence" over her family (396–97). At the same time, however, the passage allows readers to see what Alice's sister does not: echoes of Wonderland's tyrannical and selfish Queen. *Wonderland* tacitly accepts that an antidomestic Queen of Hearts might enable this final vision of domestic harmony but works to forget her, preferring to dwell on the more conventional lessons that Alice might learn from her childhood tales.

Although *Wonderland* offers the possibility that its antidomestic tale will foster Alice's development into a model of ideal womanhood, *Through the Looking-Glass* is far more skeptical about the tale's impact on her future. Much of this skepticism occurs because the later novel draws on rather different views of the relationships between adults, children's literature, and little girls. The *Wonderland* frames certainly idealize Alice, but their emphasis on the benefits she will reap from remembering the tale and retaining "the simple and loving heart of her childhood" assumes continuity between the child's experience and the woman's (164). The *Looking-Glass* frames, however, tend to follow another influential contemporary model of development, which portrays childhood as an innocent, feminized state vastly different from the corrupt, sorrowful adult world. Childhood becomes a sort of secular Eden, a paradise "inviolably, savingly separate from the adult world of anxiety" (Gilead 283). Because this model perceives childhood as separate from and superior to adulthood, it holds that adults do not retain their childlike hearts. Adults can only recapture momentary glimpses of childhood's bliss by interacting with children or by reading, telling, or writing idealized forms of children's literature such as

fairy tales. At the same time, childhood becomes the site of a deep sentimental regret that children must lose their innocence as they grow up.¹⁴

Looking-Glass is thus more determined to idealize the child Alice and more pessimistic about her growth than *Wonderland* is.¹⁵ Whereas *Wonderland's* prefatory poem gently teases the children who listen to the tale, its *Looking-Glass* counterpart does not. The *Looking-Glass* Alice is an ethereal "Child of the pure unclouded brow" rather than a pair of "little hands" steering the boat with "little skill" (173, 21). The *Looking-Glass* poem also assumes that Alice will lose her joyous innocence as she grows up. The simple, loving girl will develop all too quickly into a "melancholy maiden" subject to adulthood's "bitter tidings" and "unwelcome bed" of anxiety, sexuality and death (173). Although the poem's speaker wishes Alice to remember him and her happy girlhood, his sad prediction that "No thought of me shall find a place / In thy young life's hereafter" and his reference to "vanish'd summer glory" suggest that she will forget (173–74). These circumstances lessen the tale's value as a potentially formative influence on Alice. Instead, Carroll's speaker maintains that his "fairy-tale" will preserve an idealized, domestic childhood world that exists in comforting opposition to "the blinding snow" outside (174). The tale also will help delay Alice's departure into adulthood by weaving "magic words" to "hold [her] fast" in "childhood's nest of gladness," if only for a moment (174).

Yet *Looking-Glass* indicates that this desire to see childhood as a domestic paradise separate from and superior to adulthood is problematic as well as alluring. In particular, the novel explores the conflicted relationships between Victorian ideals of femininity and a model of childhood that contrasts innocent, feminized children with corrupt, implicitly masculine adults. Although recent studies by U. C. Knoepfelmacher and Catherine Robson have examined the ways in which idealizations of little girls play into Victorian narratives about middle-class men's development, these idealizations also interact—often in unsettling ways—with contemporary notions of adult womanhood.¹⁶ Robson correctly notes that domestic advice literature often upholds the girl as an "embodiment of the ideal home," whose "powerlessness in some ways makes [her] more 'feminine' than the grown woman" (52). But this idealized girl is not merely a prepubescent, more charmingly dependent version of the adult angel in the house. She tends to undercut her adult counterpart; a model of girl-

hood which assumes that adults are anxious, sinful, and separated from their past implicitly contradicts the domestic ideal of a calm and cheerful woman who retains her childlike heart.

Mid-Victorian writers often try to avoid this contradiction by quietly omitting the figure of the woman; they portray the adult world in exclusively masculine terms and transfer the feminine powers of comfort and moral influence onto the child. *Looking-Glass*, however, takes the view of innocent child and corrupt adult to its logical conclusion, suggesting that adult womanhood is as competitive, individualistic, and disappointing as manhood. Such a move confirms adults' worst fears about children's growth, since it implies that all children, even girls, will lose their innocence and selfless affection as they mature. By undercutting the figure of the ideal woman, *Looking-Glass* increases adult readers' desire for an idealized girl who will perform the womanly functions of comfort and inspiration. The notion that childhood is precious yet fleeting also intensifies adults' desire for a tale that portrays the child and works to prolong her brief stay in paradise. Yet even as Carroll fosters these desires, he suggests that they are impossible to satisfy. Although the image of childhood as separate from and superior to adulthood may be inspiring, such a paradise is by definition inaccessible to adults. Furthermore, *Looking-Glass* indicates that the tale that might give adults a glimpse of childhood's bliss is at least as implicated in questions of power and self-interest as the *Wonderland* tale. The later novel assumes Alice will grow and indeed is eager to do so, but her eagerness only increases adults' futile wish that she remain young. Precisely because of its sentimentally nostalgic vision of girlhood, *Looking-Glass* presents adults' and children's desires as mutually exclusive. Such conflict, in turn, places enormous strain upon the tale: a story that satisfies adult readers' desire to fix Alice in her blissful childhood will hardly please child readers eager to grow up.

Although the prefatory poem's speaker may wish to fix Alice in an idealized childhood world, her adventures portray her as conspicuously uninterested in any such thing. As Knoepfmacher has pointed out, Alice's desire to play Looking-glass chess signifies her desire to grow up and gain an adult woman's powers ("Balancing" 511). In Looking-glass country, these desires are inseparable from ambition and competition; Alice is willing to enter the game as a Pawn, but she would "like to be a Queen, best" (*Looking-Glass* 208). The speed and relative ease with which she wins the game and becomes a Queen has led Knoepfmacher to argue that *Looking-Glass* endorses Alice's desire

to grow, at least until Carroll abruptly rescinds that endorsement in the final chapters (*Ventures* 197–200; 216–26). *Looking-Glass* certainly does depict Alice's progress and implicitly her growth as inevitable: she is a Pawn whose moves are mapped out for her even before she begins to play. But her smoothly overdetermined journey to the Eighth Square does not necessarily indicate acceptance of her growth. The contrast between her success and the coronation feast which literally overturns her triumph only intensifies the sense that maturity is no prize at all, but a profound disappointment. Alice herself, who calmly pretends to mother the black kitten once she returns to her own drawing-room in the final chapter, never quite grasps this implication, but it certainly is available to the adult reader.

Alice initially believes the Red Queen's assurance that "in the Eighth Square we shall be Queens together, and it's all feasting and fun!" (212). Once Alice arrives at the Eighth Square, however, she discovers that her new role is hardly fun. The Red and White Queens are determined not to let her take her place with them as an equal. Instead, they assert their own superior status by treating her like a child, dismissing as ignorance and ill-temper all her attempts to establish her position as Queen. They even go so far as to invite themselves to her coronation dinner, justifying the breach of good manners by accusing Alice of not having "had many lessons in manners yet" (320). The Queens' rudeness and Alice's bewildered resentment cast ironic doubt on adults' desire to place children in a world of youthful bliss. Alice's relationships with adult figures are no more blissful in *Looking-glass* country than they were in Wonderland. Her position during and immediately before her coronation feast may be childlike, but it is hardly the "nest of gladness" that the prefatory poem extols (174).¹⁷

Alice's uncomfortable position as child-Queen suggests that the combination of a child's heart and a woman's offices might destroy domestic competence rather than create it.¹⁸ She fares no better at her coronation dinner than David Copperfield's "child-wife," Dora, does at housekeeping in Dickens's novel. Her title notwithstanding, Alice lacks the social experience to be an effective hostess, let alone a ruler. At first, she is even a little relieved when she discovers the feast has started without her; she remarks that she "should never have known who were the right people to invite!" (320). All too soon, however, the order that should have characterized a combination of state dinner and Victorian dinner-party plunges into chaos in the face of her inexperience. As an untutored girl, Alice has neither a ruler's

public authority nor a hostess's social and managerial skills. The polite compliance that an upper-middle-class girl such as Alice would have been taught in nursery and schoolroom only compounds the social reversals, as she bows to subjects who understand Looking-glass etiquette. And if chess pieces can exercise power over a human Queen at her own coronation dinner, the food and tableware might logically aspire to rule, also. The result is a sort of domestic coup: Alice looks up to find the leg of mutton in the White Queen's chair, the Queen herself in the soup-tureen, and the soup-ladle advancing purposefully toward her own chair, "beckoning to her impatiently to get out of its way" (336).

Admittedly, the combination of a child's character and an adult's position serves Alice well in one respect. She manages to restore order by combining the traits of the mischievous child and the furious, domineering woman. Childishly, Alice demands attention by disrupting the already chaotic feast: "'I can't stand this any longer!' she cried, as she jumped up and seized the tablecloth with both hands: one good pull, and plates, dishes, guests, and candles came crashing down together in a heap on the floor" (336). She then abandons the child's role for the furious woman's, asserting her own dominance by "turning fiercely upon the Red Queen, whom she considered as the cause of all the mischief" (336). Since the scene is already a reversal of conventional order, these additional reversals succeed in righting it. The Red Queen begins to turn into the harmless black kitten on the spot, and Alice soon wakes to find herself back in the snug comfort of a drawing-room armchair. With Alice and the Red Queen restored to their respective roles as child and kitten, the adult narrator can re-establish control over the scene and return to a peaceful vision of Alice in her drawing-room.

As it turns out, however, this return to order is even more tenuous than in *Wonderland*. On the surface, the end of Alice's dream satisfies child and adult readers' impulse to halt the feast's frightening chaos, as well as adult readers' desire that Alice return to a safe, enclosed childhood world. But although *Looking-Glass* applauds Alice's actions, it also ironizes them. The violence Alice herself does in restoring domestic order suggests that neither the ideal woman nor the ideal girl is fully recoverable: the furious woman underlies the former, while the mischievous child underlies the latter. Thus, even the scenes of Alice in her drawing-room question the figure of the loving, authoritative yet childlike woman more than the closing frame of *Wonderland*

does. Because Alice is pretending to be a mother, these scenes imply that the ideal woman who can combine an adult's competence with a child's simplicity exists only in the imagination. Furthermore, Alice's games retain subtle forms of Looking-glass country's conflicts between child and adult figures. Alice mothers her kittens by imitating adult authority figures' treatment of herself, never quite forgetting that she remains under their control. Thus, when she is playfully telling the black kitten that she will punish it for its faults, she begins to wonder if the same technique could be applied to her: "You know I'm saving up all your punishments for Wednesday week—Suppose they had saved up all *my* punishments? . . . What *would* they do at the end of a year?" (178). The effect is to emphasize the scene's fictionality (readers know they are watching a child pretending to be a mother) and the possibility of conflict even in Alice's supposedly happy family.

Given *Looking-Glass's* persistent sense of the ways in which adult figures bully child figures, the mischievous or rebellious child is never far from Alice's games, either. Alice may pretend to be a benevolent mother, but she does not pretend to be a compliant child. The narrator mentions that "once she had really frightened her old nurse by shouting suddenly in her ear, 'Nurse! Do let's pretend that I'm a hungry hyaena, and you're a bone!'" (180). Even her dream-journey into Looking-glass House begins with Alice perched on the chimney-piece, which she almost certainly is not allowed to climb—especially when there is a fire burning. When Alice takes on a motherly role, she playfully recreates her own rebellious impulses in the figure of the black kitten, who is "a little mischievous darling" (178). To a large extent, these fantasies are charming to adult readers: they can recognize their own aggression in Alice's but rest assured that she herself is only "a little mischievous darling." On another level, however, Alice's games are slightly worrisome to adult devotees of idealized little girls. Because this dream-child happily pretends to be an adult and to resist adults, her games remind adults of childhood's transience and of potential conflicts between children's desires and their own.

These tensions between child and adult figures severely limit the possibility of creating a narrative that satisfies adults' longing for an idealized childhood paradise while also amusing child readers. The prefatory poem, for instance, suggests that the tale is as difficult to grasp as Alice's dream-rushes, which begin "to lose all their scent and beauty, from the very moment that she picked them" (257). Like the White Queen's jam, the idealized "fairy-tale" of the *Looking-Glass* poem

exists yesterday and tomorrow, but not today. The speaker promises that he will continue “[a] tale begun in other days,” but that tale remains an elusive future pleasure (173). The tale of Looking-glass country as presented in Alice’s adventures does not exactly live up to this promise; although it certainly resembles her adventures in Wonderland, it is hardly a vision of “childhood’s nest of gladness” (174). Moreover, even the delightfully nostalgic and sentimental tale the poem promises remains a product of adult fiat that may clash with the child’s desires. The *Looking-Glass* poem’s overtures may be flattering, but its consistent use of imperative verbs and negative constructions implies that it is as much a command as an invitation, and one Alice might choose not to heed.

Alice’s adventures in Looking-glass country also question conventional notions of the benevolent tale-teller, the children who wish to be delighted, and the charming tale. Alice is usually reluctant to listen to Looking-glass poetry and remains skeptical of the creatures’ claims that their poems will comfort or amuse her. The creatures’ poetry and conversations often have the effect of delaying Alice’s progress in the chess game; like the prefatory poem’s ideal tale, they work to arrest her symbolic journey toward adulthood. This tendency may satisfy adult readers, but it exasperates Alice, who only wants to advance to the next square and become a Queen. Thus, when Tweedledee asks her if she likes poetry, her response is hardly enthusiastic: “Ye-es, pretty well—*some* poetry Would you tell me which road leads out of the wood?” (233). The Tweedle brothers’ determination to recite the longest poem they know dismays her still more. The poem they tell Alice, “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” reveals that she has good reason to be wary. The Walrus and Carpenter lure the “young Oysters” out for what they claim will be “A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk / Along the briny beach,” but the walk ends with their eating the young guests (234). The poem’s nonsense exaggerates conflict between generations. Adult figures’ benevolence is nothing more than a hypocritical cloak, and the desire to arrest children’s growth is literalized as a desire to kill them. The same themes recur during Alice’s encounter with Humpty Dumpty. His response to her remark that “one can’t help growing older” reveals ominous undertones behind adults’ desire that children not grow, as he takes the premise to its logical conclusion by asserting that “‘*One* can’t, perhaps . . . but *two* can. With proper assistance, you might have left off” growing (266). Alice, understandably alarmed, hastens to change the subject.

Looking-Glass never comes to a definitive conclusion about the best ways to balance adult and child readers' desires. It simply gives—and undercuts—two possibilities for creating a tale that can amuse children while satisfying adults' wish for a nostalgic escape into a blissful childhood world. Alice's encounter with the White Knight implies that one way to create such a tale is to ask all parties to pretend. During this scene, Alice graciously submits to a deluded but well-meaning adult's determination to tell a tale, feigning interest in order to please him while giving her future adult self an opportunity to redefine the event in nostalgic, escapist terms. The White Knight casts himself as the ideal tale-teller, and according to the narrator, Alice eventually remembers him in such an idealized light.¹⁹ Admittedly, this memory of the Knight's "mild blue eyes and kindly smile . . . and . . . the melancholy music of the song" is a doubtful one (307). In typical *Looking-glass* fashion, it is a memory which has not yet happened to the Alice of the adventures, and as Knoepflmacher points out, it is by no means an accurate depiction of her experience in the narrative present (*Ventures* 221–23; "Balancing" 514–15). Although Alice may someday remember herself enjoying the beautiful picture the Knight makes with "the setting sun gleaming through his hair, and shining on his armour in a blaze of light," Carroll gives no indication that she has this reaction while listening to the Knight's song (307). In the narrative present she is somewhat bored and even critical; she remarks that "the tune *isn't* his own invention" and works hard at "trying to feel interested" in yet another piece of poetry (306). Yet even if Alice's fondness for the Knight and his tale is only an illusion created in retrospect, *Looking-Glass* ultimately presents it as both lovely and fulfilling. Alice's meeting with the Knight suggests that the conflicting desires behind Victorian ideals of girlhood and fairy tales can be well served by a deluded storyteller and a child's polite deception. Because he believes himself wise and benevolent, the Knight is one of the few characters in Wonderland or *Looking-glass* country who is courteous or helpful to Alice, and for all her impatience, Alice hides it well. Her actions form *Looking-Glass's* closest approximation to the ideal little girl or to the ideal woman who retains her childlike heart. By exercising an adult's diplomatic tact, Alice manages to fulfill the ideal girl's role of delighting her elders, even if she is only feigning interest.

The closing poem also presents the child and her tales as a lovely yet satisfying illusion. It represents an ingenious, if tenuous, solution to the problem of creating an idealized childhood world. As *Wonder-*

land does, this poem validates storytelling—or in this case, poetry—as the best way to satisfy the desires behind mid-Victorian idealizations of childhood. The poem is an acrostic on Alice Pleasance Liddell’s name; although the children who listened to the original tale of Wonderland have faded into memory and those who will hear the tale have yet to do so, the ideal child remains inscribed into the poem’s present. And although Alice does not become an ideal woman who can delight her own children with her tales, this poem recreates the tale of Wonderland and Looking-glass country in a form that offers continuity across generations. Recurring tales of “a Wonderland,” told to successive groups of children, will ensure that the girl and her tales remain present, even though each telling’s “[e]choes fade and memories die” (345). The poem thus attempts to fix Carroll, the real Alice Liddell, the fictional Alice, and child-listeners in a perpetually available childhood world.

At the same time, however, the closing poem remains well aware of the irony in its depiction of a childhood paradise. After all, this idealized setting bears little resemblance to the Wonderland (or the Looking-glass country) of Alice’s original adventures: the poem’s inhabitants certainly do move “under skies / Never seen by waking eyes” (345). Other children are present only as passive listeners, their desires carefully edited to correspond to those of the adult speaker, who creates the poem unilaterally and takes for granted his audience’s “[e]ager eye and willing ear” (345). The final stanzas wryly undercut the notion of an eternal tale even as they long for it. The idealized childhood world that tale and poem create may seem to exist in a timeless lyric present, but the double meanings of lines such as “Ever drifting down the stream” reveal that it does not (345). The final lines encourage readers to dream but remind them that they, too, are drifting steadily toward death and destruction, however they may wish to linger along the way:

In a Wonderland they lie,
 Dreaming as the days go by,
 Dreaming as the summers die:

 Ever drifting down the stream—
 Lingering in the golden gleam—
 Life, what is it but a dream? (345)

Images of idealized childhood and its tales can delight, but they are dreams, illusory and fleeting; furthermore, the adult tale-teller and

imaginary child-listeners cannot escape the fact that "summers die." In *Looking-Glass*, however, the very transience and elusiveness of ideal childhood only increase adults' desire to tell lovely if delusive tales for and about little girls.

Notes

1. For studies that focus on the frames, see Coveney 195–201; Polhemus 604; and especially Madden 362–71 and Gilead 282–84. For interpretations that address the frames as representations of tensions between the narrator's desires and Alice's, see Kincaid, *Child-Loving* 289–95; and Knoepfmacher, "The Balancing of Child and Adult" 511–19 and *Ventures* 157–226.

2. Carroll called *Alice* a fairy tale on more than one occasion, most amusingly when he termed the oral story which was the book's genesis "my interminable fairy-tale of *Alice's Adventures*" (*Diaries* 1.185). Claudia Nelson has argued that much mid-Victorian children's fiction, including fairy tales and fantasy, works to teach readers of both sexes characteristics that are coded as domestic and feminine. This tendency is particularly pronounced in contemporary critics' discussions of fairy tales; Dickens's "Frauds on the Fairies," for instance, maintains that the tales teach "gentleness and mercy . . . [f]orebearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals . . . [and] abhorrence of tyranny and brute force" (566).

3. I follow Jacqueline Rose in assuming it "more or less impossible to gauge" actual child readers' responses to children's literature (9). I am more interested in tracing the various desires that Carroll's texts suggest their implied readers, young or old, may have, and the ways in which they portray child and adult figures. Rose's suggestion that child figures are constructed by adults in order to satisfy their own desires has also been a very helpful starting point for this analysis.

4. For other Victorian reviews which quote or strongly echo Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Lamb, see Johns; Fitch; "Children's Pleasure-Books"; and Dickens's "Frauds on the Fairies."

5. All italics are in original sources unless otherwise noted. All quotations from *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* are from *The Annotated Alice*.

6. The cover art of *The Nursery Alice*, designed by Carroll's friend M. Gertrude Thomson, is particularly appropriate in this respect. It depicts Alice lying under a tree, dreaming about a Wonderland that resembles the one Carroll attributes to the sister's dream in the earlier text.

7. Paradoxically, then, both Gilead and William A. Madden are correct in their seemingly disparate readings of the *Alice* frames. Madden argues that the frames help readers view the adventures as representations of the "potential madness" underlying adult reality and encourage readers to combat this madness by affirming childlike virtues (370). Gilead questions this interpretation, arguing that Alice's sister's vision "rewrites and softens" the adventures (382). If what I am suggesting is correct, *Wonderland* simultaneously invites and ironizes both these readings. The frames do encourage readers to affirm childhood's virtues, but suggest that the original tale must be rewritten from an adult's perspective to obtain this result.

8. Ironically, the emphasis on intergenerational conflict in Carroll's revisions is quite true to the spirit of many traditional fairy tales. Victorian idealizations to the contrary, in traditional tales the child hero or heroine often must confront a parent, stepparent, or other authority figure, and these confrontations are often quite violent. For discussions of familial dysfunction and violence in the Grimms' tales, for instance, see Tatar.

9. Mitzi Myers has noted the oversimplification involved in placing such a large and varied body of children's literature into a single category, but nineteenth-century advo-

cates of fairy tales rarely trouble to distinguish between poetry and prose or between various authors' political or religious affiliations. Myers, Alan Richardson, and James Holt McGavran, Jr. have demonstrated that this contrast between fairy tales and moral or informational children's literature was by no means as absolute as defenders of fairy tales made it appear. Even Carroll's parodies of Southey, Watts, and Howitt assume complete familiarity with their targets; readers must know the originals in order to catch the jokes.

10. See Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures* 172–80; Kincaid, "Alice's Invasion of Wonderland."

11. For studies that focus on Alice's competitive or predatory desires, see Auerbach 31–41; Blake 94–148; Kincaid, "Alice's" 92–104 and *Child-Loving* 289–95; and Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures* 182–85.

12. For a discussion of the similarities between Alice, the Duchess, and the Queen of Hearts, see Auerbach 38. In Carroll's original manuscript, later published as *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, the Queen and Duchess were the same figure, the Queen of Hearts and Marchioness of Mock Turtles.

13. Significantly, *The Nursery Alice's* trial scene works to reinstate conventional boundaries. It omits all reference to the King's incompetence, explains the circumstances that led up to the Knave's trial, and justifies Alice's outburst as prompted by her sense of the Queen's unfair insistence on sentence before verdict (54–56).

14. For two recent discussions of this view of childhood, see Plotz and Robson.

15. This view of childhood has very different implications from the view I have associated above with *Wonderland*, but the two are closely intertwined. Contemporary reviews and periodical articles often indicate both views within a paragraph or two, assuming that there is no conflict between them and that the same readers will respond to both; see Boyd 316 and Fitch 500. Elements of both views can be found in the *Alice* books as well. Although *Wonderland* presents a generally optimistic view of Alice's future, the sister does welcome reveries about the tale as a momentary escape from adulthood's "dull reality" (163); similarly, *Looking-Glass* temporarily abandons its emphasis on the separation between childhood and adulthood when it suggests that Alice will remember the Knight's tale.

16. See Robson's study and the chapters on Thackeray, MacDonald, and Carroll in Knoepfelmacher's *Ventures*; see also Plotz's chapter on DeQuincey.

17. Alice does rock the White Queen to sleep later in this scene, but even here she initially acts under the Red Queen's direction.

18. See Davidoff and Hall 451 and Gorham 7 on this tension within Victorian domestic ideology.

19. See Hudson 199; Kincaid, *Child-Loving* 297–98; Cohen 217–19.

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