

REVIEW ESSAY

The Fabulous Adventures of Alice with Fashion, Science, and Pinocchio

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ABSTRACT

The three scholarly monographs published between 2017 and 2020 by Laura White, Laura Tosi and Peter Hunt, and Kiera Vaclavik, are recent contributions to Lewis Carroll scholarship. They belong to what Michael Heyman calls “the sense school” of nonsense literary criticism in so far as they attribute a specific agenda, a systematic structure, a decipherable message, and a homogenised reading to the Alice tales (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, and its sequel, *Through the Looking Glass*). Each re-explores a well-known children’s classic from fresh new perspectives by relying on interdisciplinary methodologies, mingling the literary historical approach with insights of critical fashion studies, evolutionary biology, and comparative cross-cultural analysis (translation studies), respectively. Like adaptations, these critical theoretical interpretations of the Alice books are in a constant dialogue with one another within a Genettian transtextual network of multimodal narratives.

KEYWORDS: Lewis Carroll, nonsense, Victorian era, children’s literature, Alice

In an essay celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Lewis Carroll, G. K. Chesterton lamented the maturation of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* into a literary classic. He feared that the canonization of this fundamentally non-didactic fairy-tale fantasy

as compulsory reading for educated gentlemen would entail the “stiffening” of the tale’s nonsense fluidity of meanings, the fading of its “defiant folly,” and a resulting lack of interest in the work’s neutralized ambiguities. In Chesterton’s ingenious wording of these worries: “the soap bubble which poor old Dodgson [Carroll’s real name] blew from the pipe of poetry, in a lucid interval of lunacy, and sent floating into the sky, has been robbed by educationists of much of the lightness of the bubble, and retained only the horrible healthiness of the soap” (234).

Fortunately, these anxieties proved to be unfounded: the brilliantly puzzling “topsyturvydom” of the Carrollian universe holds a timeless appeal, and has allowed for a dizzying array of critical interpretations, and creative revisions. Many cultural historical eras and literary theoretical schools managed to project their own meanings, desires, and dreads onto the curious dream stories, turning Alice into a veritable shapeshifter, who alternately embodied a fragile *puella aeterna*, a dreamchild (for Victorians), a brave explorer of unconscious realms (for surrealists and psychoanalysts), a self-doubting language philosopher (for poststructuralist semioticians), a rebel toying with transgressions (for the 1960s’ countercultural and political readings), or an expert in posthuman ethics and transmedia storytelling (in postmillennial times), among others (Kérchy 2011). The Alice books are among the most translated works of literature (see Lindseth and Lang 2015), with thousands of editions in nearly all languages, and a plethora of adaptations across a variety of media forms from film, picturebook, graphic novel to ballet, opera, theme park ride, and computer game, which all open new entries into the increasingly nuanced story-world (see Kérchy 2016).

Just like the adaptations, the critical theoretical interpretations of the Alice books are in a constant dialogue with one another within a Genettian transtextual network of interconnected multimodal narratives. The three scholarly monographs I briefly reflect on

here are recent contributions to the Carroll scholarship published between 2017 and 2020. They all belong to what Michael Heyman calls “the sense school” of nonsense literary criticism in so far as they attribute a specific goal, agenda, systematic structure, decipherable message, and homogenized reading to the Wonderland tale and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There*. They re-explore a well-known, old classic from new perspectives, by relying on interdisciplinary methodologies, mingling the literary historical approach with insights of critical fashion studies, evolutionary biology, and comparative cross-cultural analysis (translation studies), respectively.

The studies being nested within a wider cultural critical context is neatly reflected by their publications within seminal series of major academic publishers: *Routledge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (White), *Bloomsbury Perspectives on Children’s Literature* (Vaclavik), and *McFarland’s Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Tosi with Hunt). The titles of the series reflect the multiple entries to the Alice books depending on the focus of analyses of the time period of the artwork’s production (Victorian era), the age of the target audience, and the implied reader title character (childness), or the genre of the iconic story (non-didactic fairy-tale fantasy).

Laura Tosi’s *The Fabulous Journeys of Alice and Pinocchio* offers a parallel reading of two contemporaneous children’s literary classics, Lewis Carroll’s Alice books (1865, 1872) and Carlo Collodi’s *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (1883), which were published with radically different social, cultural, and political backgrounds, but, as Tosi convincingly argues, they share a wide range of surprising similarities, and hence can shed new light on each other. Most importantly, both fictional universes refuted the didacticism of late nineteenth-century children’s literature by staging rebellious, inquisitive child characters, and combining inspiration from fairy tales with a social critical intent, mocking national stereotypes, hence imposing a veritable challenge to translators. It is stunning to discover the resemblance

between Collodi's and Carroll's lives in the biographical parallel Tosi draws by means of introduction. Although the figures of the authors fade into the background throughout her comparative reading of the two texts, and the monograph moves slightly out of balance, as a bit more attention seems to be paid to the Italian puppet boy than to the lost little British girl, the book will surely entertain its target audience, Carroll specialists, and children's literature scholars, with many exciting insights.

Tosi's First Part explores how both books defamiliarized national stereotypes with a transnational appeal: Alice poked fun of Victorian bourgeoisie's life in Oxford, whereas Pinocchio offered a satirical version of the struggles of the Toscan poor. Tosi studies national stereotypes, cultural associations and intercultural connections by relying on Emer O'Sullivan's imagological method to reveal how "children's literature reflects dominant social, cultural norms, including self-images, and images of others." Tosi convincingly argues that Alice's politeness, sense of humor, and ethnocentric attitude toward the eccentric creatures she meets sounds quintessentially English, while Pinocchio's hot-blooded, unreliable, impetuous features belong to the "grammars of Italian national characterization." Some exciting points remain vague, however, such as the outcomes of Tosi's survey on how Alice represents Englishness to the world, or the reasons for Alice's extreme adaptogenic quality to other languages and media. Still, Tosi's thoughts on the localizing, globalizing, and glocalizing aspects of translation are truly rewarding.

Part Two reads Alice and Pinocchio as national fantasies rooted in folktale and fairy-tale traditions, to which they also contribute with a unique reconfiguration of the generic conventions. Both owe a lot to the picaresque adventure tradition, and the Bildungsroman, they reiterate the cautionary tale in a subverted form, and by fusing the national with the individual, they customize the universal elements of the fantasy genre. Although—as Lindsay Myers (2011) demonstrated—Pinocchio clearly belongs to the Monello Fantasy, highly

popular in late nineteenth century Italy, characterized by a criticism of the institutional school system, anthropomorphic animal characters, and naughty child protagonists, Alice's stories, curiously, also resonate with this children's fantasy subgenre.

The original books were followed by a flood of Pinocchiatos and Alice type fantasies (see Sigler 1997). The final, Third Part is devoted to postmodernist experiments with the two tales from Walt Disney's animation adaptation, which toned down the ambiguity and anarchy of the original source-texts to Angela Carter's and Robert Coover's more metafictionally self-aware re-embodiments of these iconic figures. A closing chapter on simultaneous genre readings in Empire fiction complements the parallel drawn between Alice and Pinocchio, with a parallel between De Amici's *Cuore* and Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* as prototypical Italian and British school novels. This is followed by an amusing little crossover fictional piece "Strange Meeting in Wonder-Tuscany," filled with bilingual puns authored by Peter Hunt, who also contributed a short but intriguing chapter on gender roles in the two books to the First part of Tosi's volume, enhancing the thematic, structural, and cultural connections with associative artistic ones.

When Cambridge University's Homerton College organized the conference *Alice Through the Ages* in 2015 to celebrate the sesquicentennial anniversary of the publication of *Wonderland*, the aim was "to offer new understandings of Carroll's work by subjecting his text to new theoretical approaches and considering the history of adaptation and its uses in popular culture." All plenary speakers of this academic event opened up new entries to a canonized classic by adopting innovative interdisciplinary critical perspectives. Besides Dame Gillian Beer, whose brilliant *Alice in Space* was published in 2016, and Jan Susina, whose 2009 *The Place of Lewis Carroll in Children's Literature* has become a major reference point for students of children's literature and Carroll alike, Kiera Vaclavik stunned the audience with her charting the emergence of Alice as a style icon. Studying how the emblematic,

enigmatic Victorian Dreamchild's look had changed through the ages, adaptations, and media-transitions, and how it had inspired countless fashion designers, illustrators, and stylists, led Vaclavik to stage and curate the 2015 "The Alice Look" exhibition for the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood in London. Her 2019 monograph *Fashioning Alice* can be regarded as a transmedial enhancement of the same project.

The conjoining of the study of fashion and fiction, and more specifically, the semiotic scrutinization of Alice's vestimentary markers can certainly be traced back to Roland Barthes's influential book, *The Fashion System* (1967), which revolutionized our conceptions of dressing, by regarding clothing as a system of signals structured like language, endowed with a communicative function, and worthy of semiological attention. In line with critical fashion studies, *Fashioning Alice* contends that attention to "literary fashioning" can enable a deeper understanding of texts, their contexts, their traditions, and innovations. According to the initial hypothesis, comprehending the connotations of Alice's costume might give us a better idea of changing interpretations of Carroll's text, and of the potential reasons for the timeless appeal of the Alice-look for visual artists of all eras.

Although literary scholars might miss a critical introduction of fashion studies as a theoretical approach at the beginning of the volume, the brief but to the point cultural historical, biographical, and iconographic contextualization of a plethora of previously unexplored material in a lavishly illustrated volume makes up for this theoretical gap. A great merit of the study is that it draws on material, visual culture, and performance besides the print editions. It illuminates Carroll's aesthetic preferences through a careful selection of diary entries, letters, pamphlets, and non-fiction essays as well as his photographic work, amateur illustrations, and costume collection, but also tie-in products from postage stamp cases to parasols. Alice's Victorian afterlife is explored through a scrutinization of theatrical adaptations, illustrated editions, and advertisements.

The Introduction coins the phrase “dress-based approach” for the book’s methodology, aiming to achieve “an enhanced and revised understanding of Carroll’s enigmatic heroine, her creator(s) and the reception, transmission and circulation of the books in which she (initially) exists.” The focus on “the first phase of Alice’s career” provides an exhaustive reading of the development of Alice’s visual identity throughout the four final decades of the late nineteenth century, concluding that the character’s most important feature is her kaleidoscopic variability, fragmentation, and proliferation. Ambiguous Alice crosses borders of age, gender, and nationality, oscillating between trends of modernization and idealization, timelessness and a relative fashionability that made her relatable for contemporaneous readers. The vibrant Victorian “Alice industry” foreshadows the multiplication and diversification of the figure following the copyright lapse of 1907, prevailing in our postmodern era.

The book is composed of four parts. The first starts out with an analysis of a familiar visual corpus: Carroll’s own sketches decorating the initial *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground* manuscript, and Punch humor magazine cartoonist John Tenniel’s illustrations to the Macmillan editions of the Alice tales created under Carroll’s close supervision. Vaclavik sheds light on Carroll’s aesthetic sensibilities, but also confirms Michael Hancher’s claim that Tenniel’s vision was instrumental in realizing the ingenious iconotextual dynamics of *Wonderland*, as well as of its sequel, *Looking Glass*, and its oral-pictorial distillation for pre-readers in *Nursery Alice*, along with reiterations across a variety of media, including spin-offs, cartoons, sketches, wallpaper and biscuit tins. The second part studies a wide range of Alices circulated and enacted in the Victorian period through exploring dozens of previously neglected items, while devoting attention to the figure’s transnational appeal beyond the borders of the UK, the US, Japan, and Australia, among others. The final chapters give consideration to theatrical adaptations and amateur interpretations, including fancy dress performances of Alice.

Fashioning Alice is an informative and entertaining read. Vaclavik carries out impressive research by anatomizing hundreds of previously neglected documents, but she also dares to admit occasional blindspots of her research. (For instance, one can only speculate about the true nature of Tenniel's and Carroll's cooperation, or the reasons for the incongruity in Alice's visual representations in Carroll's own sketches decorating the *Underground* manuscript.) The book is literally eye-opening in so far as readers will certainly reconsider their current view of Alice envisioned as a little girl with blonde hair, clad in a blue dress, white apron, striped tights, black shoes, and a hairband—largely popularized by the Disney animation adaptation. The close character-analysis also sheds new light on sensitive issues, such as the Victorian fetishization of children, and Carroll's own child photography, often problematized by posterity. The book offers a balanced view of Carroll's art, debunking myths of the author as predator or saint, while emphasising challenges of picturing girls: Carroll's photographing them in their nightgowns without corsets liberated the child's body from constraints of Victorian corporeal discipline, but also objectified their lived realities freeze-framed in images of *his* making.

Similarly to Vaclavik's project, Laura White's monograph, *The Alice Books and the Contested Ground of Natural History* pays attention to the mimetic qualities and real-life references of an emphatically non-realistic, fairy-tale fantasy by aiming to examine how Carroll's dream-narratives fictionalized Victorian scientific debates prompted by Darwinian theory about the proper relationship of human beings to animals, and the rest of the natural world. The primary textual engine of Carrollian nonsense here is identified with the conflicted Victorian frame of mind. The topsy-turvy world is assumed to be a logical outcome of the coexistence of multiple conflicting belief systems: the traditional Christian religious worldview, new accounts of reality prompted by revolutionary scientific and technological discoveries; Romantic ideological heritage grounded in the beliefs in natural rights, empathy,

the ameliorative properties of nature, and the powers of imagination as a means of improving reality. Many critics have convincingly demonstrated that Victorian children's literature excels in thematizing this epistemological crisis in multi-layered controversial texts, which fuse (mock)Biblical parable with biology lesson and meta-imaginative fantastification. Paradigmatic examples of these cross-over narratives recording Victorians' changing view of Nature include Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies*, Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," and, of course, Lewis Carroll's Alice tales.

As White convincingly contends, Carroll as a reverend don at Christ Church College Oxford, an ardent student of nature, and a defender of animal rights (fighting against vivisection, hunting, and the torture of animals in his pamphlets) happened to be in the epicentre of a wide-spread cultural battle between conservatives and reformists that touched upon a variety of issues including the relation of Man and Nature. While the destabilization of the privileged status of human beings is a typically Victorian anxiety, the challenging of anthropocentrism (questioning the assumption that Man is the apex of creation, the master of language, and the universe) resonates perfectly with the recent twenty-first century ecocritical, posthumanist philosophical agenda. This might be a reason for the timeless appeal of the Carrollian absurd humor that mocks how a variety of strange species struggle to comprehend, convince, dominate, or even eat each other. According to White's hypothesis, we cannot fully understand Carroll's jokes without understanding the presumptions he held about nature, science, animals, and plants.

White's book contains six chapters. The first three interpret Carroll's "academic satires" as tongue-in-cheek commentaries on established academic fields and emerging disciplines of modern sciences, including the Darwinian evolutionary theory's accounts of the survival of the fittest, degeneration, hybridization, or extinction. Nonsensical creatures like the odd pair of the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle create cognitive dissonance by embodying

evolutionary impossibilities, signifying epistemic dead-ends. But the former also makes a subtle joke on Ruskin's conservative aesthetics (his praise of classic and condemnation of modern representations of griffins in his third volume of *Modern Painters*), while the latter's humorous appeal comes from its literal embodiment of a Victorian culinary product, the mock turtle soup. The fourth chapter discusses how Carroll's conservative Christian views informed his treatment of animals, his views on anthropocentrism, the predator-prey hierarchy, and interspecies solidarity. Chapter Five concentrates on Food Nonsense to investigate the Victorian ethics of diet and meat eating, while Chapter Six concludes the volume by reinforcing its initial assumption on how the Alice Books lend themselves to be interpreted as "fantastically reconceived works of Victorian natural history."

Although the volume primarily focuses on the Alice books, it also reflects passingly on Carroll's later children's fantasies and non-fictional works (academic satires, letters, diaries, non-fictional public writings) as well as his work as illustrator, photographer, book designer and collector, mathematician-logician, philanthropist, and philosopher. Reflections on his private library unveil potential inspirations of his work, and provide further food for thought. For example, they invite us to speculate about the subtle implications of the fact that although Carroll owned nineteen volumes on Darwinian theory, neither *The Origin of Species* nor *The Descent of Man* was part of his collection, and his only Darwin edition was the 1872 *The Expression of the Emotions*, on a subject near to Carroll's life-long interest in photography, and the representation of sentient beings.

White acknowledges the cleverness of Carroll's dual audience address, arguing that the in-depth comprehension of the Alice books necessitates both childish and adult interpretive strategies: a familiarity with the conventions of fairy tales and nursery rhymes, a taste for slapstick humor, death jokes, and carnivalesque nonsense, as well as a receptiveness to philosophical riddles and logical fallacies, along with the understanding of nineteenth

century cultural references. She convincingly points out that the systematic overturning of hierarchies in *Wonderland*, and *Through the Looking Glass* can be interpreted just as much an anarchic infantile play, as a critique of the contemporaneous educational system, or a mockery of the idea of the Great Chain of Being. In her sceptical conclusion, White doubts the existence of an actual ideal reader who could realize all the possible significations of the multi-layered Carrollian nonsense, contending that the author himself “was sure that the full range of his satiric intent would remain undetected” (18).

White is probably right in arguing that we shall never fully understand the complexities of Carroll’s work, no matter if we approach it from a synchronic or diachronic analytical perspective, adopting Victorian or postmodernist interpretive frameworks to decode his nonsense’s enigmatic meanings. Uncertainty is, perhaps even strategically, meant to remain a part of the *Wonderland* experience. Yet, each of these three volumes sheds new light on a nonsensical textual realm that delights us precisely by mocking readers’ compulsion to make sense.

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