



‘I’ll be judge, I’ll be jury’:

‘Tail’-Telling, Imperialism and the Other in *Alice in Wonderland*

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Although Lewis Carroll’s Alice has generally been viewed favourably by readers, literary criticism has exposed a number of flaws in Alice’s character and behaviour across both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* — flaws largely unchallenged within the narrative and therefore interesting at a time when, as has frequently been noted, the dominant mode in literature for children was the moral fable, and its goal moral improvement. Nina Auerbach, observing a continual preoccupation with eating and hunger, identified Alice’s attitude to the creatures she meets in Wonderland as ‘often one of casual cruelty’ (Auerbach 1973, p.37). Following this view, Jennifer Geer has examined Alice’s unideal version of femininity in her rebellious and noisy imitation of the Queen of Hearts in the trial scene especially. To me of particular interest is Daniel Bivona’s identification of the self-centredness that leads Alice to require the games of Wonderland to comply with her own conceptions of games and to object or intervene when they fail to do so: Bivona, admittedly in a rather sweeping use of the term, describes this self-centredness as ‘imperialist’ (Bivona 1986, p. 143). I wish here to extend Bivona’s observation and consider the extent to which Carroll’s depiction of Alice portrays a child immersed in Victorian cultural perceptions of race and in contemporary English attitudes to the Other. I argue that Alice reflects the dark side of the contemporary ideal of Englishness in her responses, and indeed overtures, to the creatures in the Pool of Tears and Caucus-Race chapters in particular. Meanwhile, Carroll’s representation of the Mouse’s ‘tale’ as the ‘tail’ Alice perceives rather replicates than interrogates her response by implicitly inviting the reader also to be distracted and indeed entertained by stories of violence.

M. Daphne Kutzer has discussed the ways in which British fiction for children from Kipling onward encodes ideas about empire that reflect the changing experience of empire over the past century; her analysis focuses on the anxieties about empire that developed from 1900 and especially after World War 1, as novelists recalled an era of dominance that their own children, such as A.A. Milne’s Christopher Robin, would have little chance to inherit. But as she also remarks, ‘The rise of imperialism is roughly contemporaneous with the golden age of children’s literature (approximately 1860-1930), and the two grew up together’ (Kutzer 2000, p. 10). I would argue that images of imperialism can be seen as early as *Alice in Wonderland*, published in 1865 — although I am not

arguing that Carroll himself saw them this way. It should be noted that Charles Kingsley published *Hereward the Wake* in the same year: that novel celebrated a Saxon hero who resisted William the Conqueror, simultaneously recalling what many historians saw as a founding moment in English history and valorising resistance to that invasion. Hereward as a Saxon epitomised what many in Victorian England were claiming as particularly British values; in the years immediately following the Indian Mutiny of 1857, those values were seen as of especial importance. Austin Warren's comment of *Alice in Wonderland* that 'The central character is Alice herself, a correctly reared, upper-class little girl . . . who will one day grow into being a well-balanced, sensitive, and sensible woman, responsive and still more responsible, very British, the mainstay of the British empire; she has something of Victoria herself about her' (Warren 1980, p. 345) directs us, however, to consider how those values are represented in Alice.

Before I discuss this, I should like briefly to consider what it means to see Alice as an imperialist. Sarah Minslow has recently suggested that 'the voices of the colonizers have become part of [Alice's] dialogical self' (Minslow 2009, p. 107), but also argues that 'Alice is not always in the imperialist, powerful position, nor is she always a representative of the colonised child' (109), pointing to a 'polyphony' in the text that 'represent[s] her many selves and the instability of the frameworks of social hierarchies' (Minslow 2009, p. 110). While I accept Minslow's argument about the polyphony within the text, I think it is important also to observe that being an imperialist and being a colonised child are not necessarily opposed positions: it depends on your definition of the 'colonised child'. Some theorists of childhood, and of child reading, following Jacqueline Rose, use this phrase to mean that the reading child's subjectivity is displaced by what the adult society, especially the adult writer, wishes to impose. But there is a problem with that notion if we take it too simply: it presumes, somewhat romantically, that the child's subjectivity actually exists independently of the social framework. This is an idea that any postmodernist would dispute, and indeed a lot of Modernist writers as well: elsewhere I have demonstrated the significance of social structures in framing and indeed constructing the character of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for instance (Webb 1998). John Stephens posits that 'the subject exists as an individual, but that existence is within a dialectical relationship with sociality. The subject has a singular existence in its self-picturations and the stories it can tell about itself, but these self-constituting moments are just that — *moments* of interpretation within the social relations which produce the subject and which the subject helps to produce' (Stephens 1992, p. 47). From that perspective, one could argue that Alice as a realistically represented character is 'colonised' precisely to the extent that her subjectivity has been *formed* by the social structures around her, including those of imperialism: ideology is, after all, encoded in many places, including the texts of which Alice has demonstrably read a considerable number. Despite her frequent difficulties with the requirements of etiquette and the meanings of words, I argue that Alice has effectively — and unsurprisingly — internalised the power structures of British culture.

As I indicated earlier, the Victorians themselves saw texts as a primary tool for inculcating cultural values, and Alice's experiences in Wonderland highlight her prior training: she attempts to ground herself by reciting the various moral verses she has been taught, and several of the creatures she

meets similarly regard her ability to recite these verses as a test of her identity and worth. The fact that she is unable to do so correctly, instead producing either nonsense-verse in ‘I passed by his garden’ or satire in ‘You are old, Father William’, of course provides the joke for Carroll’s contemporary readers. But it is important to note that for all the texts within *Alice in Wonderland* that are parodies of (mostly Victorian) originals, there is one that is given completely straight. This is the material with which the Mouse proposes to ‘dry’ Alice and the assorted small creatures who have survived the pool of tears (1992, p. 21) — and it is a prose account of the origins of the English nation, taken from Havilland Chepnell’s *Short Course of History* published in 1862 (1992, p. 22 n1).¹ It is notable that Alice has initially speculated that the Mouse may not know English because ‘I daresay it’s a French mouse, come over with William the Conqueror’ (1992, p. 18). Although the Mouse does in fact speak English, it seems to respond to her perception by shortly after recounting the events surrounding the Norman Conquest, to the confusion of the listening Duck:

‘— *I proceed. Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria, declared for [William]: and even Stigand, the patriotic archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable — ‘Found **what?**’ said the Duck.*
*‘Found **it,**’ said the Mouse rather crossly: ‘of course you know what “it” means.’*
‘I know what “it” means well enough, when I find a thing,’ said the Duck: ‘it’s generally a frog or a worm. The question is, what did the archbishop find?’

(1992, p. 22; Carroll’s emphasis)

It is a good question. Stigand the patriotic archbishop in fact found it advisable to make his peace with William — indeed ‘to go with Edgar Atheling to meet William and offer him the crown’ (1992, p. 22). This is the sentence the Mouse eventually completes. It is an indication of the power of the imperialist endeavour: even the patriotic locals must concede. At the same time we are provided with an image of the Englishness in which Alice is being raised — the passage is taken directly from the history from which the Liddell children were learning with their governess — and reminded of the origins, and continuing nature, of that Englishness in conquest and subjugation. The Duck’s apparent error over the referent of “it” is in fact not an error: the referent for Stigand, as for the Duck, is consumption.

Although Alice never seems to realise it, conquest and subjugation, as well as consumption, are in fact central to her responses to Wonderland. Carole Rother has argued that Alice is extraordinarily preoccupied with death, from which the other characters seek to distract her — but it is her indifference to the death-fears of others that interests me here. This is exemplified by her frequent reference to her cat. At the beginning Alice beguiles the long fall into Wonderland by thinking of Dinah — thoughts that lead inexorably to the preoccupation with food that will dominate her adventures, but with a significant emphasis: “‘Dinah’ll miss me very much tonight, I should think!’” (Dinah was the cat.) “‘I hope they’ll remember her saucer of milk at tea-time. Dinah, my dear! I wish you were down here with me! There are no mice in the air, I’m afraid, but you might catch a bat, and that’s very like a mouse, you know. But do cats eat bats, I wonder?’” (1992, p. 9). Alice wishes for Dinah’s company, but recognises that Dinah will in turn need occupation, and that

occupation will be predatory. It is significant that Alice's thoughts focus on Dinah's eating habits — habits that are socially valuable in Alice's world, but destructive to the creatures on which she preys. In Wonderland, perhaps as an outcome of dream logic, Alice is about to meet some of those creatures; what is interesting is that she shows herself to be remarkably resistant to the corresponding shift in social values that this might imply. The central joke in the second and third chapters is in fact Alice's failure successfully to communicate with the creatures she meets after weeping the pool of tears.

Alice attempts to initiate conversation with the Mouse she sees swimming in the Pool by addressing it as 'O Mouse!', a phrasing that might seem humble, or at least poetic, but that we learn she believes to be correct on the authority of her brother's Latin Grammar book: 'A mouse — of a mouse — to a mouse — O mouse!' (1992, p. 18). Latin and Greek were at this time central to the education of the English governing class — that is, its boys — and it is significant that Alice seeks guidance from her brother's grammar for her first direct spoken encounter with otherness as personified in the Mouse.ⁱⁱ Her second utterance, following her broadminded reflection that the Mouse may not speak English, is 'Où est ma chatte?', which we are told is 'the first sentence in her French lesson book' (1992, p. 18), but also coheres effectively with Alice's thoughts when falling down the rabbit-hole — Alice is still seeking her cat.

The reader is of course expected to recognise the inappropriateness of the question as addressed to a mouse, and the Mouse reacts accordingly. Interestingly, Alice shows herself to be simultaneously well aware of and obtuse about the Mouse's feelings: although 'afraid that she has hurt the poor animal's feelings' when it is in fact, as Carroll tells us, 'quivering with fright' (1992, p. 18), she apologises by saying that 'I quite forgot that you don't like cats' (1992, p. 18). And this allegedly past oblivion seems oddly persistent: she invites the Mouse to share her own liking for her cat by describing its charm, ending 'and she's such a capital one for catching mice' (1992, p. 24), which again makes the Mouse 'bristle' and 'tremble' (1992, pp. 18-19), before trying the subject of dogs instead, hopefully describing a 'nice little dog' she knows that 'kills all the rats' (1992, p. 19). As James R. Kincaid has remarked, 'All subjects lead to aggression and death' (Kincaid 1973, p. 97). It should not be surprising that the Mouse swims hastily away and only returns following her coaxing, when he promises that he will 'tell you my history' (there is a further joke in that the 'dry' prose he first recites is in fact her own, English, history) and explain to her why he hates cats and dogs (1992, p.19).

Alice's behaviour here is comic, but it is also perverse: the contrariness she will complain of in her later encounters with characters such as the Caterpillar is in fact first visible in her own conversation. Kincaid describes her as displaying 'an instinctive rudeness, rooted in self-absorption', and suggests that she is 'ineducable' (Kincaid 1973, p. 97). Certainly Alice is represented here as failing in her attempt to communicate with the Other because of her own preoccupations. Although her excursions into the Latin Grammar and French lesson book might suggest a praiseworthy if misguided attempt to go beyond her own cultural boundaries, her attempt is in fact limited by those boundaries. The books, though dealing with foreign languages, are her

brother's and her own, and presented to both as part of their induction into the English governing class; and the seemingly polite attempt to find some topic of conversation turns out both simply to continue Alice's own earlier thought and to reflect her actual understanding of animals — they eat or are eaten, and Alice's allegiance is to the consumers, Dinah and the 'nice little dog' (1992, p. 19).

Nor does the situation improve when the Mouse tells his 'history'. The 'tail' told by the Mouse is a tale of coercion: the 'Fury' whom the mouse in the story meets, as signalled from the start by the fact that this is an explanation of 'why [this Mouse] hate[s] C and D' (1992, p. 24), offers to engage him in a pastime that has the mouse's death as inevitable end.ⁱⁱⁱ We are told that what we see is Alice's idea of the tale, which she forms when distracted by the Mouse's changing identification of what he will tell from 'history' to 'tale' (1992, p. 24). The visual appearance of the tale is crucial to Carroll's joke about Alice's response; see beside for an image of the tale from the Arthur Rackham edition, which is typical in layout (2009, p. 31).

Note that the Mouse's story is about a mouse, that is, the Mouse's tale contains, as well as looking like, a mouse's tail; this punning effect is multiplied by the fact that, as has been pointed out (Anon 1991), the shape of each verse if typed out normally is the shape of a mouse (short, short, long). This shape in turn is repeated four times; the image of the mouse recurs, that is, until the final full stop puts, as it were, a period to its life at the word 'death'. My colleague Jean Harkins has pointed out to me that the decreasing size of the font has the visual effect of speeding up the language, as the eye covers the line faster: the result is to create an effect of the 'cur' rushing the words and pouncing on the mouse — 'I'll try the whole cause and condemn you to death GULP!' At the same time, the miniscule size of the font at the bottom of the tail makes the word 'death' hard to see: this underlines the effect of the poetic format in which Alice (and the reader) receives the Mouse's story. With the shrinking of the tale its hard lesson becomes difficult to read: the final word, 'death', is in tiny print. That effect is of course a merely aesthetic one: as Fury makes his predation into a game of cat-and-mouse, so Alice, and beyond her Carroll, transforms the grimness of the story into a riddle game in which the reader is beguiled by the charm of the poem and distracted by its appearance. Carroll's

"Fury said to
a mouse, That
he met in the
house, 'Let
us both go
to law: I
will prose-
cute you.—
Come, I'll
take no de-
nial: We
must have
the trial;
For really
this morn-
ing I've
nothing
to do.'
Said the
mouse to
the cur,
'Such a
trial, dear
sir, With
no jury
or judge,
would
be wast-
ing our
breath.'
'I'll be
judge,
I'll be
jury,'
said
cun-
ning
old
Fury:
'I'll
try
the
whole
cause,
and
con-
demn
you to
death.'

text aestheticises the violence of the story, as Alice sees only a mouse's tail and the reader sees that tail and is amused by Alice's mistake — an amusement that is itself a distraction from the reality of the violence of which the Mouse speaks. Death remains at the centre of the story, but it is, as you see, hard to perceive.

The text itself locates this diminution firmly as Alice's reaction. Instead of listening to the Mouse's 'long, sad tale', she observes his physical tail, wondering why it is sad. When he thinks her inattentive she 'humbly' replies 'You had just got to the fifth bend, I think.' 'I had NOT!' replies the Mouse, to which Alice cries 'A knot! O, do let me untie it!' (1992, pp. 25-26). In colonialist fashion, Alice sees herself as the necessary solution to all problems — even if those problems are illusory, or in fact of her own making. The Mouse's endeavours to engage her in an understanding of the circular logic of predation in his 'tale' of Fury fail because Alice's differing concerns lead her to misunderstand him so completely that he has no option but to walk away just as, presumably, he had done from Fury — a parallel Alice, typically, fails to observe. When he departs in disgust she instead wishes aloud that Dinah were there to fetch him back, and not only explains to the other creatures 'eagerly, for she was always ready to talk about her pet', that Dinah is 'such a capital one for catching mice, you ca'n't think!' [sic], but also quite unnecessarily adds 'oh, I wish you could see her after the birds! Why, she'll eat a little bird as soon as look at it!' (1992, p. 26). Most of the remaining creatures are, of course, birds, and they all hastily depart.

At one level this seems to be the Wonderland logic whereby 'good' manners go unappreciated — adults do not treat children with the respect with which the children are taught to treat them — but it is also an indictment of Alice's manners: she is doing the equivalent of 'talking about rope in the house of the hanged' in her persistent refusal not only to acknowledge the creatures' resistance but to think about the reasons behind it. Alice does not want to think about the realities of power, and does not want to learn why anyone should dislike cats and dogs. Her own preferences are paramount. We are meant to be amused at her misunderstanding of the Mouse and entertained by the concrete poem Carroll produces from its tale, but we should notice the extent to which that particular work of art is a construct of Alice's desire. Alice's reading of the Mouse prettifies the ugly, allowing her to retain her vision of her cat as charming and ignore the implications of the predatory skills she admires.

I suggest that Alice's immediately following encounter with a (to her) giant puppy, which is rarely discussed because of its apparently humdrum nature, in fact provides the appropriate complement to her dialogue with the Mouse. When Alice first meets the puppy, 'She [is] terribly frightened all the time at the thought that it might be hungry, in which case it would be very likely to eat her up in spite of all her coaxing' (1992, p. 32). She is, however, demonstrably unable to connect her own short-lived fear of the puppy with the Mouse's fear despite having just been told about the latter. Alice's neglect of the creatures' point of view does not end when she is at risk from the puppy, in an apparent Carrollian version of a moral lesson following her callousness to the creatures. Despite her tiny size, Alice still sees the puppy as a puppy, that is, as a playful pet that should be harmless; its danger is eliminated when Alice exerts control by *playing* with it:

Hardly knowing what she did, she picked up a bit of stick and held it out to the puppy: whereupon the puppy jumped into the air off all its feet at once, with a yelp of delight, and rushed at the stick, and made believe to worry it: then Alice dodged behind a great thistle, to keep herself from being run over; and the moment she appeared on the other side, the puppy made another rush at the stick, and tumbled head over heels in its hurry to get hold of it . . .

(1992, p.32)

Alice's game with the puppy has been referred to by at least one critic as a disappointing and unmemorable episode presumably for its lack of the surprising in the fantastic — the puppy behaves as puppies do, so it is just a matter of her becoming Gulliver in Brobdingnag, as Richard Kelly points out (Kelly 1990, p.81). But it is therefore another version of the tricky nature of Wonderland — even when things behave as they might be expected to, your own changes make them hard to deal with — and, importantly for my argument, it also demonstrates Alice's fundamental inability to change perception while underlining the reality of the consumption/predation issue. Even games can end in death; but the solution is nevertheless a game, although it is not clear that Alice realises this when she holds out the stick, which could as easily be a threatening gesture. The vision of the puppy as easily distracted from its (potential) hunger and charmed by a stick even in the hands of a creature much smaller than itself suggests the contemporary British view of the Other as easily distracted by trivia and easily dominated.^{iv}

This imperialism is the power Alice seeks to exert within Wonderland. Her vision dominates to the extent that her final, potentially anarchic, rejection of the law court has the quality of control. Her contemptuous cry 'You're nothing but a pack of cards' (1992, p.97) could have Dickensian resonance, but here suggests a recasting of an alien system into something she can manipulate, even play with. Jennifer Geer has suggested that the reduction of the trial to playing cards relocates Alice within the realm of the acceptable feminine following her Queen-of-Hearts-like outbursts (Geer 2003, p. 10), but it also makes very clear the status of the characters within Alice's view of the world. The court system is important here; one of the things on which the British prided themselves was their superior system of justice, which they imposed on the nations they had conquered or colonised and which they saw as a major justification for that colonisation. The fact that even Alice can see that the trial is 'nothing but a pack of cards' does not reduce its significance for those caught within it, like the Knave of Hearts. Those unfortunates are in the position of the Mouse, trapped in a system constructed and controlled by their enemies. The King of Hearts demonstrates a circular logic in his comment on the anonymity of the poem at the heart of the trial (1992, p. 94), recalling Fury's assertion 'I'll be judge, I'll be jury . . . I'll try the whole cause and condemn you to death' (1992, p. 25) — and, as for Fury, the law case can be a pastime for Alice, one she can manipulate as she chooses.

Alice in Wonderland depicts a 'colonised child' who has internalised the cultural values of imperialist England. Within the novel Alice's attitudes to the creatures she encounters reflect the imperialist vision. Her attempts at conversation with the creatures she meets in the pool of tears demonstrate not only her self-centredness but also her pleasure in forces the creatures must identify

as predatory. The Mouse's tale, in which Fury's death threat is diminished to game not only by Fury's own suggestion of the trial as pastime but by Alice's vision of it as a 'tail', encapsulates this situation. Carroll's representation of Alice's perception simultaneously reveals the relationship between the predator's pastime and the victim's fate and buries it within punning visual ornamentation that allows the reader likewise to be distracted from the actual violence of the situation the tale describes. Like the English in their colonies, Alice shows herself unable to deal with those she meets on other than her own culture-bound terms. She thus represents how imperialist cultural values are manifested within the individual formed by the texts of that culture — of which Carroll's text, through its invitation to the reader to be amused by the aestheticisation of violence in the Mouse's tale, itself becomes an example.

Endnotes

ⁱChepnell's book was published in 1862, the year when the events that formed the origin of *Alice in Wonderland* took place.

ⁱⁱThe oddity of selecting staff for government at home and abroad on the basis of a facility with Latin declensions and the composition of Greek verse has often been noted; it is not clear whether Carroll, who as Charles Dodgson was a don within the system of education that was relied on for these outcomes, recognised this oddity.

ⁱⁱⁱThe tale identifies the animal who threatens the mouse as 'Fury', a name unlikely to be bestowed on a cat or even a dog by a human being at this period; the name is presumably the mouse's name for its enemy, which holds a threatening power over its life that might be seen as parallel to the tormenting power of the Eumenides. The later reference to Fury as 'the cur' may also surprise a reader who would associate Fury's cunning with cats rather than dogs. It is possible that Carroll may have used the term simply for the sake of the rhyme, but envisaging Fury as a dog would add more point to the subsequent episode with the puppy, discussed below.

^{iv}See Matthew Arnold's 1867 essay 'On the Study of Celtic Literature' for how Arnold, as a comparatively liberal-minded intellectual who welcomed the 'visibl[e] abat[ing]' of antipathy to the Irish (1910, p. 27), perceived such examples of the Other as the Irish and Welsh. The Celts, according to Arnold, have wonderful imaginations, but 'The skilful and resolute appliance of means to ends which is needed both to make progress in material civilisation, and also to form powerful states, is just what the Celt has least turn for' (1910, p. 84) — and they are effeminate: 'no doubt the sensibility of the Celtic nature, its nervous exaltation, have something feminine in them, and the Celt is thus peculiarly disposed to feel the spell of the feminine idiosyncrasy; he has an affinity to it; he is not far from its secret' (1910, p. 86).

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