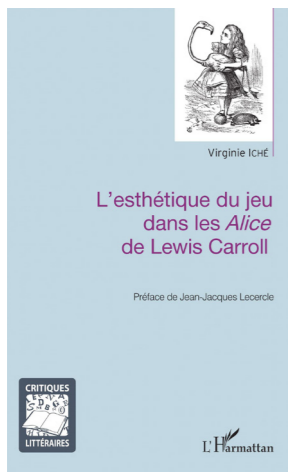


Three Times in Wonderland

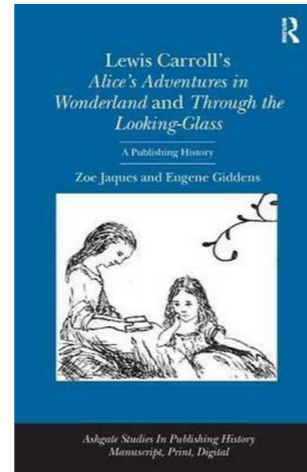
Anna Kerchy



Virginie Iché. *L'esthétique du jeu dans les Alice de Lewis Carroll*. Préface de Jean-Jacques Lecercle. Paris: L'Harmattan, coll. 'Critiques littéraires', 2015. p. 254. ISBN: 978-2-343-07927-1



Celia Brown. *Alice Hinter den Mythen. Der Sinn in Carroll's Nonsens*. Verlag Wilhelm Fink, 2015. p. 240. ISBN: 978-3-7705-5858-2



Zoe Jaques and Eugene Giddens. *Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass: A Publishing History*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. p. 263.

Nothing proves more the challenging complexity of an artwork than a choir of synchronic critical voices which propose in parallel with each other inventive, new interpretations of a widely-read canonized classic some hundred and fifty years after its original publication. My review essay outlines a transnational, comparative interface of three recent academic studies published between 2013 and 2015, all targeting creative rereadings of Lewis Carroll's Victorian nonsense fairy-tale

fantasies about Alice's adventures in Wonderland and beyond the Looking Glass. The scholars weighing in the postmillennial discussion of this irresistibly curious textual corpus are all specialists of nineteenth-century and children's literature who fuse their philological skills with exciting research agendas—such as the sociology of texts and publication history (Jaques and Giddens), ludology combined with reception theory and the post-semiotics of subjectivity (Iché), or the study of antiquity (Brown). A carnivalesque proliferation of meanings results from

the different methodological apparatus, theoretical frameworks, cultural backgrounds, and languages used to discover untraveled pathways into the familiarly strange Carrollian textual territory.

Zoe Jaques and Eugene Giddens' *Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass: A Publishing History* (2013) was published in the year preceding the sesquicentennial anniversary of the publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, as an early bird at the dawn of worldwide celebrations, and remains a definite reference point for readers interested in the adventurous publishing history of the Alice tales. An overview of the classic's transformation from improvised oral narrative to gift-book manuscript to print, illustration, theatrical play, game, collectible, television, and cinema is particularly interesting for twenty-first century readers. Those readers are likely to be familiarized with the figure of Alice through transmedia storytelling, whereby integral elements of Wonderland's fictional universe are so intricately dispersed across multiple delivery channels (each making a unique, original contribution to a coordinated entertainment experience) that it becomes tremendously difficult to tell the original apart from its manifold adaptations.

Jaques and Giddens indeed understand publishing history in a broad sense in accordance with McKenzie's notion of the sociology of texts, aiming to trace the cultural-history of "verbal, visual, oral, and numeric data's" transmissions, modifications, and repurposings in different eras, locations, and interpretive communities. Hence, as the introduction points out, the book is concerned not just with the cultural objects we call "Alices" but with "the stories surrounding their creation and use."

The study relies on documentary evidence, including Carroll's letters and diaries as well as previously published research, to demonstrate Carroll's ambiguous attitude to authorship and the authority over his fictional universe. His rigorous control over the publishing, printing, illustration, and marketing process (illustrated by his recalling the first print run because of his dissatisfaction with the poor paper quality of Wonderland's initial sheets) was coupled with his recognition of the inherent flexibility of his episodic dream-stories which constituted "unusually fruitful sources for reappropriating" (an extraordinary adaptogenic quality he exploited in two adaptations and abundant meta-textual commentary he added to

the original text) and an ardent desire to disseminate his story (hence his insistence on having it translated).

The progression of Jaques and Giddens' book is chronological: the first chapter deals with the initial evolution of the story covering the period from 1862 to 1875, the second traces the impact of the Alice novels and its early adaptations on Victorian audiences, the third discusses the canonical sedimentation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a children's classic between 1890 and 1907, and the fourth and fifth follow the textual and non-textual afterlives of *Alice* up until the present day. Jaques and Giddens smartly promote their study by insisting on the possibility of its episodic reading; readers with particular interests might browse through the work and read different chapters isolated from one another without losing the thread of the argumentation. The first three chapters offer a thoroughly researched panoramic overview of "the full and surprising journey *Alice* has taken from its inception to the present day." Besides twists and turns familiar from seminal works as Williams and Madan's *Lewis Carroll Handbook*, Cohen and Gandolfo's *Lewis Carroll and the House of Macmillan*, and other important scholarship produced by the Lewis Carroll Society that Jaques and Giddens admittedly rely on throughout mapping the journey of *Alice*, readers may indeed be surprised by a few new episodes complementing the well-known genesis story—for instance, the discussion of how *Alice's* authorized and unauthorized copies got published with different illustrations for the US market.

The last chapter, entitled "Alice Beyond the Page," covers a wide range of high and low cultural adaptations for adults and children alike, from the earliest cinematic takes to Alice in music videos. Alas, this section remains more descriptive than argumentative and strangely fails to refer to any seminal theoretical frameworks which could prevent the authors from making simplistic statements like calling the Royal Ballet's *Alice* an uninteresting take on the novelistic original. Theoretically minded readers will miss references to Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, to Benjamin Lefebvre's insights on textual transformations in children's literature, or to Henry Jenkins' research on new media literacies, or even (in the unjustly denigrated ballet adaptation's case) to critical dance studies scholarship. However, this is a must-read for readers looking for a concise

overview of the intricate textual metamorphosis from the initial to the latest retellings for the young and the old and from paratexts to tie-in products.

Virginie Iché's *L'esthétique du jeu dans les Alice de Lewis Carroll* (The Aesthetics of Play in Lewis Carroll's Alice, 2015) treads in the footsteps of Katherine Blake's seminal book *Play, Games, and Sport. The Literary Works of Lewis Carroll* (1974) by locating in the focus of her research the aesthetics of play in the Alice tales. However, besides extending the list of games Blake enumerates as essential in constituting the nonsensical spirit of Wonderland's fictional universe, Iché regards games and plays as major structural organizing principles of the Carrollian narrative which invite fundamentally ludic interpretive strategies from its ideal (i.e., playful) readers. Besides the card and chess games providing logical frames to the two Alice novels and memorable episodes including the caucus race, the lobster quadrille, or the Queen's croquet game illustrating the illogical functioning of the make-believe realm, Iché calls attention to an impressive range of games from the kitten's game of romps with the ball of worsted to the origami featuring on a Tenniel illustration; most importantly, she studies games on diegetic, narratological, stylistic, and linguistic levels—scrutinizing language games, wordplay, puns, neologisms, riddles, and intertextual allusions abundant in the literary nonsense genre.

Iché's theoretically informed analysis pays special attention to the role attributed to the reader, who is meant to oscillate in the game-space between spontaneous, instinctive free play and rule-bound, disciplined game. Iché elaborates on a series of complementary notions such as Roger Caillois's *paidia* and *ludus*, Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque subversion and ideological containment, or Colas Duflou's *legaliberté* conjoining lawfulness and liberty via a freedom in and made possible by legality. She argues that the essence of literary nonsense resides in its play with expectations: readers believe in order to gain agency by filling in textual gaps caused by the disruptions of common sense, but eventually they must realize that the blanks do not allow for an unrestrained, creative free flow of meanings; rather, they prove to be intertextual echoes, sites of the "already said" which has been erased. Inspired by Wolfgang Iser's and Umberto Eco's reception theory—contrasting their different understanding of textual gaps, taking sides with Eco's—Iché convincingly unveils the par-

adoxical process of how the playing reader is also played at (*lecteur joué/jouant*) but can nevertheless embark on a "counter-signification" process and "counter-interpellate" the text interpellating him/her in an Althusserian sense.

One of the remarkable feats of Iché's text is the combination of a meticulous rhetorical close reading of treacherous signifiers with the macroperspectivism of ideology-critical analysis of the social constitution of subjectivity. With a genuine Carrollian pun in the final chapter, "Du Jeu au Je," Iché suggests how the playing of games evolves into the de/construction of identities. Throughout the dialectics of the textual game, via an alteration of freedom and restraint, rules both enable and delimit ludic agency for the implied model reader and the actual "impostor" reader alike, initiating the paradoxical experience of being a player and a plaything—like Alice, a chess pawn and girl adventurer—in one. However, this understanding of the literary interpretation grounded in play's constructive and defensive role for the reading subject—a method Iché elaborates by relying on Michel Picard's seminal book *La lecture comme jeu*—can be applied as a general model to decipher the formation of the speaking subject as a paradoxical process that both implies subjection (i.e., reduction to a "subject in speech", a "spoken subject") and entails a liberating subjectification for reader, character, and author alike.

Iché's book is based on her doctoral dissertation defended at University Paris 10 under the supervision of Jean-Jacques Lecercle, the author of seminal works including *Philosophy of Nonsense* (1994) and *The Force of Language* (2004). Iché, a disciple of the Lecerclean school, is well-versed in theory, yet her study (shortlisted for the 2016 SAES/AFEA research prize) is also highly enjoyable for newcomers to language philosophy or Carroll studies.

Celia Brown's interest in Wonderland is truly multimedial: Besides her book *Alice Hinter den Mythen. Der Sinn in Carroll's Nonsens* (Alice Behind the Myth: The meaning in Carroll's Nonsens, 2015), illustrated with her pen drawings, she presented several solo exhibitions of visual arts and lecture performances related to the Alice theme (*Alice im Spiegelland, Soirée zu Alice* Freiburg, 2007, 2011). Brown's demythologizing project, *Alice Hinter den Mythen*, aims to decode the puzzling Carrollian nonsense and attribute meaning to apparent meaninglessness through manifold con-

textualizations of the oeuvre. In seventeen essays, she unveils the contemporary themes, cultural allusions, and mythological references Carroll had woven in his novels.

Some of the chapters—which read *Alice* alternately as a historical document of Victorian technological and intellectual advances and as a manifesto of the author's love of arts or of his child worship—do not make any unprecedented claims. Elsewhere, Brown boldly risks getting lost amidst an abundance of crisscrossing pathways she ventures on to solve Wonderland's riddle. Her introduction catalogues about a dozen interpretive strategies she used throughout her journey through the Alice books—including psychoanalytical, satirical, classical, scientific, spiritualist, drug-induced, moral, Darwinian, mathematical, sectarian, and esoteric readings.

However, Brown's knowledgeable untangling of *Alice*'s intricate web of allusions does contain genuinely innovative insights. She demonstrates how topics of general interest for nineteenth century audiences were interlaced with tales from antiquity, mystical matters, and alchemical magic, reflecting Carroll's proximity to the hub of Greek scholarship in Oxford as well as his interest in his times' Egyptomania and Orientalist fantasies, hermeticist esoteric thought, and paranormal phenomena, too. Brown's associative logic relates the Caterpillar advising Alice to Thoth, the Egyptian God of knowledge, the arts of magic, and the judgment of the dead; in her view, the White Rabbit plays Hermes, and the Mouse represents Giordano Bruno. The nonsensical reasoning of the frog footman recalls the Brekekekèx-koax-koax dispute in Aristophanes' comedy *The Frogs*; the Mock Turtle is a tongue in cheek reference to the metamorphic Tortoise in Apuleius's *Golden Ass*; the looking glass mirrors Elizabethan astronomer-chemist John Dee's crystal ball used for occult divination and conversing with angels; and Humpty Dumpty's big word "impenetrability" is traced back to proto-scientific ideas of Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*. Brown's storehouse of new readings is thought-provoking, but some of her speculations are confusing: Alice's identity crisis evokes the "myriad named" goddess Isis, but the Duchess's elaborate headdress also recalls Isis with baby Horus in her lap, while the Cheshire Cat is not only identified with Abraham Lincoln but also the ghost of Pentheus, and a maenad of Dionysian mysteries, too. Readers might not be so

easily convinced that the White Queen's believing herself an incredible age should be interpreted as a symptom of opiate use as recounted by Thomas De Quincey.

The structure of Brown's book is kaleidoscopic: her extensive list of briefly outlined and occasionally fragmentary ideas about possible intertextual allusions do not constitute a coherent argumentation but work more like annotations to the well-known Alice tales—fleeting visionary glimpses which might provide inspiration for more in depth investigations. This quick succession of ideas with subtitles on nearly every page borders on the vertiginous but also fulfils a postmodernist research agenda, strategically rejecting the fixation of ultimate final meanings with the activation of a dynamic free flow of ideas. On the whole, Brown's book of associative snippets, complemented by a glossary of John Camden Hotten's London street slang dictionary and a selection of her Alice-inspired drawings, is delightful like a box of pralines, promising a surprising new flavor with each bite.

Certainly, the feat is not over yet to Alice aficionado's greatest contentment. The past years saw the publication of important works like Gillian Beer's *Alice in Space: The Sideways Victorian World of Lewis Carroll* (2016), Edward Wakeling's *Lewis Carroll: The Man and his Circle* (2015), and an *Alice*-themed double special issue of the Croatian journal of research on children's literature and culture *Libri & Liberi* (2015). And there is still more to the contents of the Carrollian Drink Me! bottle than one could imagine...



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