8

Research Article

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A "Fabulous Monster" and a "Wonderful Boy:" Gender and the Elusive Victorian Child in the Alice Books and Peter Pan

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Abstract: Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking-Glass," and J. M. Barrie's "Peter Pan" are highly critiqued and explored works of British children literature. Both queer and hermeneutic readings allow approaches that intrinsically question gender dichotomies, providing tools to pick out underlying themes. Thus, focusing on the concepts of the "child hero" and the "genderless child" of Carroll's and Barrie's respective Victorian and Edwardian backgrounds, spatial – the dream worlds of the Wonder- and the Looking-Glass land, the colonized Island of Neverland – as well as temporal aspects – the linear, episodic quest of Alice, the immortal, cyclical existence of Peter – point to the subversive elements of play, memory, and narration in the texts. While Alice is bridging dream and reality in an oscillating, paradoxical act of self-aware transformation, Peter is otherworldly and inhuman himself, actively rejecting heteronormative standards and demands. Both are trespassers and assume roles, and confuse, adapt, and bend supposedly fixed rules. Their transgressions are subdued in the pretended ahistoricity of children's storytelling, referring to the responsibility of adaptions to further expand the hermeneutical circle.

Keywords: Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan, narrative theory

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871),¹ and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*² are both classics of British children literature, read on bed sides since generations, transformed into cultural myths over time. Both had their share of modernizations, reinterpretations and adaptations in literary, stage, comic book, video game, and film format. Both were adapted by Disney, multiple times. Both were appropriated by the academic world, and "forced to," as G. K. Chesterton put it, "inflict lessons on others" (AA 7).

While Alice, owing to the legacy left with Carroll's scholarly works, roams the arts and philosophy (see, e.g., Gaßner, et al.; Davis), the figure of Peter Pan has been picked up by Freudians and Jungians alike. Understood as an exceptional representative of the eternal child motif (Yeoman), Peter lent his name to the "Peter Pan Syndrome," his counterpart Wendy to the "Wendy Dilemma" of 1980s popular psychology, thus replaying and affirming what is presented as a fundamentally ill-fated, but ultimately necessary heterosexual relationship dynamic (Quadrio; Kiley, *Peter Pan Syndrome*; Kiley, *Wendy Dilemma*). In a way, feminist scholarship, equipped with psychoanalytic tools, has reinforced these critiques: the

¹ Used here is the 1970 edition of *The Annotated Alice* (AA), as it contains both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*.

² Used here is the novelization published in 1995 in Penguin Popular Classics: Peter Pan (PP).

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interpretations of Alice range from an "unruly," "liberated" heroine, setting out on her own journey (Lloyd; Little), to a slavish and manipulated puppet of a pedophiliac male author (Garland; Shi). Peter and Wendy are often interpreted as polar opposites of a gender dichotomy (Shipley), and while it is possible to concentrate on Wendy's side of the story (Smith), the narration itself ultimately silences women and objectifies and fetishizes little boys (Rose).

The following analysis will sidestep these discussions to concentrate instead on the child heroes, their otherworldly quests, and their construction in the context of a distinct Western narration, implemented by the authors Carroll and Barrie (Hourihan). By juxtaposing "the circularity of the imaginary travel and the linearity of the quest as such" (Ricoeur, "Narrative Time" 185), it hopes to approach gender (or maybe rather: *agender*) aspects through queries of metatextual identity construction, relocating the child motif and questioning the place of the authorial narrator with what Sedgwick calls a "*queer* specificity" (2). The concluding section of this article will return to and recontextualize the notion of the child hero, their gender, and their role. Before this, the third chapter picks up on the cycle of narration and the chronological, sequencing role of the story plot that Ricoeur indicates in "Narrative Time" to further inspect the perfidious forms it takes on in the dream-like lands of the *Alice* and *Peter* tales.

The "problem of interpretation" - and with it, the opportunities - between "objective meaning" and "subjective intention of the author" that Ricoeur points out elsewhere (Interpretation Theory 76) is intensified in the storytelling for children, and further complicated in the cases of Carroll and Barrie. "[A]dult interpretations of children's behavior, whether in literature or in psychology, are always contaminated by previously established adult assumptions about childhood" (Nodelman 30), thus setting up a fundamental "impossibility of children's fiction" (Rose). While I disagree with Nodelman's all too clear-cut parallelization of the adult-child relation and the European imperialistic concept that Edward Said calls "Orientalism," I accept the labelling of the child muse, the child protagonist, and the child reader as a childish other³ that is dependent on adult narrations and representations of the world surrounding them. "Looking at adult visions of childhood, and adult desires for their children, provides a mirror for adult desires and longings for themselves," and in the context of a British "culture of imperialism" in both the Victorian and Edwardian Era, the colonial sneaks into the texts produced for a child audience as an underlying theme (Kutzer XV-XVI), making the act of *othering* by adult storytellers in fact a double act. The imaginations these storytellers produce and the narratives they draw up are necessarily recognizable for their readership, even if distorted by subjectivity. The lands Alice visits in her adventures and the island of Neverland where Peter Pan takes the Darling children might seem strange and confusing, but they are also familiar as stories that skew, undermine, and reestablish conventions. The second part of this article centers these metaphorical non-places. It traces the intersection between the literary processing of both deliberate and unconscious real-life influences and the distorting nature of satirical and storytelling exaggeration as a metalevel, where author and audience meet.

But first, what brought these books into being is outlined: Carroll and Barrie both took incentive and inspiration from a very specific audience, consisting of the children of friends. Both the *Alice* books and *Peter Pan* originated from oral storytelling in a most familiar circle. Kincaid points to the Victorian society contexts that not only made these friendships between adults and children acceptable, but that, in developing a cult of the child, declared them to be worthwhile and desirable. The child so adored is ultimately "empty," it is a social readable idea, a child cipher that is abstract and constructed. Kincaid sees its *otherness* in close connection with the *otherness* of another cipher: the Victorian "child-lover" or the "pedophile." As today's society and research reaffirms the pure, empty role of the childish *other*, the supposed "child-lovers," like Carroll and Barrie, become its negative, its counterpart *others* (4–7).

³ Mentioning Lacan's, Derrida's, and Foucault's writings on the "other" and the "abnormal" that gets disciplined to fit into a norm, Nodelman writes: "As ideal representations of this list of qualities, children are purer and better than adult humans, and therefore, ironically, less than human – not in fact human at all. Other" (34). See also Coats 4.

I. Curious Commissions

The first anecdote goes as follows: In July 1862, the Oxford Christ Church don Charles Dodgson took three of the children of his dean, Henry Liddell, on a "golden afternoon" boat tour on the Thames (AA 21), telling them stories like he used to do. One of the girls, 10-year-old Alice, who had been posing for Dodgson's photography since she had been four, asked him to write it down. Two years later, he presented her the manuscript of Alice's Adventures under Ground, full of in-jokes between the Liddell children and Dodgson and illustrated with Dodgson's own drawings, because, as protagonist-Alice wonders in the first lines: "[W]hat is the use of a book ... without pictures or conversations?" (AA 25; Gaßner, et al. 58–71). Deeply entrenched in the progressive art circles of his time, Dodgson was presented with the opportunity to publish a revised Alice in 1865, entering into a "stormy relationship" with the "first and most famous illustrator" of both of the Alice books. John Tenniel (Dalby 13–15), As a *Punch*-caricaturist and children's book illustrator in equal parts, Tenniel was able to apply both of his talents to Dodgson's works, taking up and underlining many of Dodgson's subtle allusions and parodying a number of contemporaries from the art, literary, and science world, and from national and College reform politics (Jones and Gladstone). With the publication of the first Alice edition, Dodgson's writing alter ego Lewis Carroll came to be and established himself further with the following releases of poems (e.g., Phantasmagoria and Other Poems in 1869 and The Hunting of the Snark in 1876) and prose (Alice through the Looking-Glass followed in 1871, Sylvie and Bruno in 1889, and Sylvie and Bruno Concluded in 1893).

Another origin story: In 1897, the Scottish writer James Matthew Barrie met three boys and their nurse in the Kensington Gardens in London, befriended first 5-year-old George and 4-year-old Jack and later their mother, the barrister wife Sylvia Llewelyn Davies (Birkin 41, 45). After a summer holiday that the Barries spent together with the Llewelyn Davies family in 1901, Barrie presented the boys George, Jack, and Peter with two copies of *The Boy Castaways of Black Lake Island*, a recounting of their joint pirate island adventures with photographs by Barrie (Birkin 84–91).

The novel The Little White Bird, published in 1902, is a fictionalization of the relationship between Barrie and George Llewelyn Davies: Like Birkin states, "the book is narrated in the first person by Barrie, who thinly disguises himself as Captain W-" (57). The Little White Bird is not intended for a child audience, but a few sections are retellings of Kensington Gardens episodes the old bachelor protagonist experiences with George's novel stand-in, David (121-132). Stories are told to David about "Peter Pan" (133-209), the fictional namesake of George's baby brother. All babies of the London district are birds first, roaming the Gardens, the Captain tells David, and Peter "escaped from being a human when he was seven days old; he escaped by the window and flew back to the Kensington Gardens." This storytelling is a joint, shared experience, with the Captain providing "the bald narrative and most of the moral reflections" and David "the interesting bits" and details (134–135) and thus reflects the conception process of child imagination and adult editing Barrie also applied in *The Boy Castaways*. The chapters comprising the Peter Pan lore were published separately in 1906 as *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, with initially 50 color plate illustrations by Arthur Rackham (who, in turn, published his own illustrations for *Alice* in an edition in 1907: Dalby 76–77). But before this, Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up was performed onstage in 1904. On this basis, the 1911 novel Peter and Wendy was published and later renamed to Peter Pan and Wendy, and again later to Peter Pan. The stage play and its novel merge Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens and The Boy Castaways, a fairy tale and a pirate adventure, setting the scene for the hybrid form of Peter Pan himself. The star part of the stage play was cast with actresses right from the beginning, and with great success, making Peter Pan "the first of the pre-teen heroes" (Birkin 118). Denis Mackail wrote about the actress Nina Boucicault in the title role: "'[She] was the Peter of all Peters ... She was unearthly but she was real. She obtruded neither sex nor sexlessness [...]" (Birkin 117).

"The Victorians liked little girls, the Edwardians worshipped little boys. The Victorian child is a symbol of innocence, the Edwardian child of hedonism. In fiction, the former is good, the latter has a good time," Wullschläger states, opening up binaries: between girl-boy, good child-naughty child, innocence-hedonism, Victorian-Edwardian, and, consequently, Carroll-Barrie (111). But, as Kincaid points out, it is largely the perceived "genderlessness," the "asexuality" of the child cypher that fascinated Victorians

and Edwardians alike (Kincaid 14). To refer to gender differences perceived as "common sense" today, established in a post-Freudian, hypermodern capitalist culture and to tack it onto whole eras of literature about and for children means to ignore the vast literary canon proving otherwise.

It also means to pass over a very specific, tangible context of personal connections, relations, and availability that constitute what is in texts about Carroll and Barrie often ominously called "preferences." When he was not "Dodgson" in a strict and hierarchical ordered college setting that threatened him with ever-present reform efforts, Carroll frequented the highly aestheticized, quasi-religious art circles of the likes of Julia Margaret Cameron and Alfred Tennyson. In both surroundings, young girls were around, as daughters, as models, and as icons. When Barrie was not writing, managing stage performances of and promoting his works, he was athletically inclined and a fervent cricket player (Kincaid 51). It was in photography that all these personal, cultural, and societal connections intersected. Both the Liddell and Llewellyn Davies children were "secured, placed and framed" by Carroll's and Barrie's camera lenses before being "drawn in" by the stories made up for them (Rose 2). The Alice and Peter stories were visual before they were verbal, and the camera has a way of focusing and transforming, bending to the artistic vision that betrays its close linkage to fetish and voyeurism. Carroll's portraits of Alice Liddell and other girls in costume as well as Barrie's photographs of the Llewellyn Davies boys in recreation and play contain the fundamental belief that the child – as motif – is indeed not "empty," not without assertion, but that they transform and undermine the elements that they are staged with and are thus subversive in their own right (Waggoner; Birkin). This might be an essential appeal of the child as muse for adult artists who, like Carroll and Barrie, were often and paradoxically obsessed with control: The child as subject always taints, and, acting out the direction given by the adult, is never able to fully adapt to the assigned role but converts it – into the childish, the playful, and the grotesque.

II. Strange, Familiar Lands

The leap is a metaphysical, not a spatial one: When Alice falls down the rabbit hole, when she is miraculously able to climb through a living room mirror, when Peter teaches the Darling children to fly and guides them from their nursery to "second to the right, and straight on till morning" (PP 39), it makes the Wonderland, the Looking-Glass land, and Neverland alike spaces of *here* and *not here*. Unlike the linedup stations of girls' lives in "domestic dramas" (Townsend 52–63) and the outward reaching, imperialistically centered islands and territories in "adventure fictions" targeted at boys (Brantlinger 31–34), the locations of the fantastical, while otherworldly, ultimately stay home in spirit, and mirror and reflect back to the ways of life that lay in front of the literary gateway, satirizing them – and thus pulling them into sharp focus.

Barrie's island of Neverland is populated with a contradicting mixture of female-coded fairy tale creatures (mermaids and fairies like Peter's sidekick Tinker Bell) and the misfits of colonial storytelling: "savages" ("redskins"), "beasts," "pirates," and the homosocial group of the "lost boys," reckless and chaotically empty-headed without their leader Peter Pan. With the remarkable exceptions of the "princess" Tiger Lily and the "gigantic crocodile" (PP 56), the latter group is marked as male in unison. The text itself points out this gender difference – and its own hybrid structure with it: fairy tales for the girls, adventure stories for the boys – when Peter, after bursting into the sheltered Darling nursery, lures Wendy to Neverland with the promise to see mermaids and her brother John with the mention of pirates (PP 34–38).

⁴ For his *Boy Castaways* project and subsequently while conceptualizing *Peter Pan*, Barrie was strongly influenced by Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* and Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (Birkin 18, 84). While Neverland is a fantastical place, it cannot be overemphasized how deeply and fundamentally the imperialist ideology runs in its concept; "The Great White Father" being Barrie's title for the original play for a while (Birkin 105).

This might shed an early light on the "disturbing element" of Wendy in the inconsistent surroundings of Neverland: child enough to follow Peter to Neverland that is forbidden for adults, she is, like Barrie himself wrote, a "bore" and the shadow of the nurse interrupting boyish war games (Birkin 87, Hourihan 100). In the group of children under Peter Pan's lead, she is singled out, used, picked at, and punished because of her perceived gender identity.⁵ The choice of Wendy, "a little girl" with "no real experience" (PP 74), to play substitute mother for Peter and the lost boys is made emphatically clear in its imperialistic and paternalistic extent when it is entangled in the text with Peter accepting his role as "the Great White Father," making Wendy a "loyal … housewife" who assents: "Father knows best." It leads to detailed reenactments of a "Happy Home" around the parental couple Wendy-Peter (PP 105–109). "Even the pirates" – as Neverland's adult counterpart for the lost boys – are "awed" by Wendy's reenactment of motherhood, and the terrifying, flamboyant Captain Hook nearly "faints" when she looks at him with "frightful contempt" (PP 146).

Between the binary of Hook, who wants to kill him, and Wendy, who wants to cuddle him, Peter stands as outsider and middle ground who sees both of these attentions as mere opportunities to have fun and to play. All his relationships rely on roles that are performed: He means everything but is nothing except a "wonderful boy," as he affirms to his pet enemy Hook (PP 94). "It was Peter's cockiness" that positively "tortures" and teases the mutilated and humiliated Hook, for whom the fight with Peter seems to weigh decidedly heavier, and who, like Wendy, does not seem entirely satisfied with the way Peter has assigned the roles. But unlike Wendy he can fight back with the same violent language that Peter understands (PP 127).

Peter points out the disturbance the dovish Wendy brings into the fantastic and playfully violent setting of *his* Neverland that is decidedly not heteronormative: "It is only make-believe, isn't it, that I am their father?," he asks, refusing to take any caring responsibility for the lost boys, "it would make me seem so old to be their real father" (PP 110). Neverland is Peter Pan's playing field, in a colonial sense and in a more fantastically sinister sense: It is stated early on that Peter "thins" the lost boys "out" "when they seem to be growing up, which is against the rules," rules set up by Peter alone (PP 52). The violence that is ever-present in Neverland, from murderous mermaids and swearing, treacherous fairies to the lost boys themselves that end their adventures on the island by massacring the pirates, is intrinsic in these games, presenting a sharp contrast to the harmony of family life that Wendy represents and that, interestingly, everyone, from the lost boys to the pirates, seems to long for – everyone except Peter.

While Peter is in perfect control of his own island – and perfectly content there – Alice falls headfirst into Wonderland and stumbles in the following from confusion to distraction and back. Like the Looking-Glass land of the second book, Wonderland is not Alice's, and she struggles to fit in or understand the rules right from the start, when the fall down the rabbit hole is not as fast nor as deadly as suspected. Because she realizes that she will not know where she is should she "fall right through the earth," she links her own social awkwardness (in an imagined conversation with a person with female pronouns, nonetheless) and her self-image as a "little girl" (AA 27). After a few instances of growing and shrinking and a first lengthy social interaction with a "queer-looking party" of talking animals (AA 45), she is not so sure of herself anymore: When the stern caterpillar asks her, "Who are You?", she stutters, "I-I hardly know, Sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then" (AA 67). While Peter Pan enjoys an unabashed certainty concerning his own identity, Alice is strongly concerned with it. Her own shape and size – and her note of self with it – are, like her surroundings, subjected to incessant transformation. The text and the illustrations both leave no doubt that at least Alice's distortions in Wonderland, triggered by food, are of the monstrous kind (AA 36) – and later, having arrived in the Looking-Glass lands, she is referred to openly as a "fabulous monster" by the Lion and the Unicorn (AA 288-289). Still in Wonderland, it is only when a pigeon accuses her of being a serpent (and thus an egg-thief), that Alice remembers she is supposed to be a "little girl" - but for the

⁵ In a cruel and ironic twist, Wendy's fascination with fairy tale elements is thus used against her when she is abused (in line with fairy tale logic, see Bottigheimer 155) *because* she is female by the very creatures she came to Neverland for.

hatching pigeon it does not matter what Alice is but what she supposedly does: eating eggs, something that both serpents and little girls do (AA 75–78).

A common line of modern interpretation is the emphasis of the role food plays in Wonderland: it triggers self-transformation, and points out a hierarchy, a food chain (Garland; Shi 195–196). But the remark of the pigeon also suggests how chaotic this hierarchy is in Wonderland, where everything is in constant movement: Jones and Gladstone interpret Alice's elongated neck in the pigeon episode as a hint at Lamarckian theories and link the giant puppy that the tiny-sized Alice cannot play with properly to Charles Darwin (Jones, Gladstone 252-254; AA 64-66). The neat and clear line of human evolution theories is not only turned upside down in Wonderland, it is shuffled around altogether. Animals and sentient things wear clothes, talk and sing and express themselves with unmistakable bluntness, and while Alice changes - and an outward change seemingly always means an inward change – other beings do too. A human baby turns into a pig (AA 86–87), and all the knowing Cheshire cat does is transform, appear, and vanish, making the only constant, a smile, more menacing than encouraging (AA 88-89).

The one certain thing in Wonderland is – like it is in Neverland – the threat of violence. Most times it is subtle, when Alice stumbles from one dubious situation to the next, sometimes it is explicit, like when she meets the Duchess and her cook. In the "large kitchen" - the traditional place of female domesticity and servitude, yet also quite possibly a "laboratory gone mad" (Jones, Gladstone 208-209) - both of the femalecoded figures are incredibly violent (AA 80–84). The cook throws all sorts of kitchen utensils with the clear intention to hurt everyone around her, and the Duchess abuses her child, turning a wholesome and educational poem ("Speak gently!") into a coarse "burlesque" ("Speak roughly") (AA 85).6 Alice does not note the ugliness of the Duchess until she meets her a second time - it is not in connection with her violence, but with an overdone sweetness that borders on harassment. After some time in prison, the Duchess has undergone a character transformation herself and physically crowds Alice now, "digging her sharp little chin into Alice's shoulder," determined to detect morals everywhere and to agree with "everything that Alice [says]" at the same time – in stark contrast to her earlier behavior (AA 120–121).

The "Ugly Duchess" belongs, with the Red and White Queens of the Looking-Glass land, to a row of characters that Jones and Gladstone suggest have "something male about them," who are "transvestites" or "Pantomime Queens" (63). In their effort to work out contemporaries of Carroll as inspirations for his characters, they point to not one, but two possible influences for the Duchess: Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, and Thomas Henry Huxley (208). For the White Queen, they propose a mixed-gendered model: the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron and her friend William Makepeace Thackeray (159-160). Even if one disagrees fundamentally with Jones' and Gladstone's speculations and historical quest, the fact remains that the characters of Wonderland and Looking-Glass land alike are compounds, composites grotesquely merging human, animalistic, and material physiques and attributes, picking up on, illustrating and rearranging proverbs and sayings. Gender is one of the pieces at play in this field of possibilities, placing the Carrollian nonsense in a nonsense tradition in the likes of Christopher Smart's Mary Midnight and Aubrey Beardsley's grotesque and overt sexual visions (see Wild; Brophy).

Alice, who realizes that the most blatantly violent character in Wonderland, the Queen of Hearts, is "only" part of "a pack of cards, after all" is not troubled by the Queen's tyranny as she is from the Duchess' advances (AA 108). The Queen's frequent execution orders are never carried out because of the King of Hearts' interventions, whose violence is subtler and more bureaucratic⁷ (AA 114, 125). Alice is able to stand up against their reign by blunt force alone. Her sheer size as she continues to grow allows her to finally speak up and dismantle the game at play, waking up from her dream by reiterating: "'Who cares for you?' said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time.) 'You're nothing but a pack of cards!'" (AA 161).

The King and Queen of Hearts – like the White and the Red Kings and Queens – come in pairs in order to fit in a game logic that is taken up again in the Looking-Glass land, stricter and without the seeming

⁶ In the Annotated Alice, Martin Gardner states that there is "little doubt" that John Tenniel's Duchess depiction is shaped in the likeness of the sixteenth-century portrait of the "Ugly Duchess" by Quentin Matsys (82).

⁷ Jones and Gladstone propose that he is moulded after the father of real life-Alice, dean Henry Liddell (80-81).

Friederike Frenzel

Alice enters into this mirrored world with renewed curiosity, but the same courage she left Wonderland with before: when noticing the animated living room interior and chess pieces, she initially is still her size and seems to be invisible to them, acting as an unseen force from outside (AA 187–190). John Tenniel's illustration for Carroll's famous poem about the "Jabberwocky," in which the only thing "clear" is, as Alice puts it "somebody killed something," shows Alice as the dragon-slaying hero in a feminized armor, wielding an oversized sword at a snarling, scaled creature in a vest (AA 198). But the poem is a nonsense one, and as things fall in disarray and Alice takes the place of the White Pawn, she finds herself at the hands of female authority figures again and is infantilized by the Red Queen, "the concentrated essence of all governesses," as Carroll wrote himself (AA 206). After the Red Queen leaves her behind and Alice meets the White Queen, this relationship is reversed once more, as the White Queen seems, again in Carroll's words, "helpless as an infant" (AA 245) and makes Alice fuss over her.

III. The Vicious Cycle of Narration

The White Queen, while being generally untidy and despite Carroll describing her as "gentle, stupid, fat and pale" (AA 245), gives sound advice concerning the rules of Looking-Glass land and consoles Alice when she starts crying about her loneliness (AA 250) – before she turns into a knitting old sheep, another miraculous transformation, alongside a sudden change of setting (AA 252). The boat trip Alice goes on with the sheep reminds of the boat excursion that started the Wonderland tale (AA 254–257), just as some characters from Wonderland reappear in the context of the Looking-Glass chess game: the March Hare and the Hatter are now employed by the White King (who is hesitant and nervous like the King of Hearts) as Anglo-Saxon messengers Haigha and Hatta (AA 279). While their Wonderland tea party with the Dormouse (AA 93–104) went – timelessly – around and around and only ended when the King and Queen of Hearts cited them before their royal court, they now move in a linear fashion, though absurdly: "One to fetch, and one to carry" (AA 280).

When Alice, after meeting the White Knight (who may or may not have been Carroll himself⁸) crosses the chessboard and is crowned "Queen Alice," she consistently pursues this linear movement herself (AA 315) and takes on the new role graciously: "Queens have to be dignified, you know! [A]nd if I really am a Queen ... I shall be able to manage it quite well in time" (AA 317). Having reached the end of the chessboard, she is caught at an impasse between Red and White Queen, and when her queenly banquet turns into chaos, Alice has to put an end to the game, like she did to the court hearing of the cards in the first book: "I can't stand this any longer!' she cried, ... 'And as for *you*,' she went on, turning fiercely upon the Red Queen, whom she considered as the cause of all the mischief ... 'I'll shake you into a kitten, that I will!'" (AA 336).

In game and in text, two different things have happened thus: With capturing the Red Queen, Queen Alice has checkmated the Red King, who slept through the entire game of chess, not having been moved once. At the same time, she wakes from her own dream and realizes she is shaking not the Red Queen, but her black kitten. She goes on and identifies the two, as well as the white kitten with the White Queen and

⁸ Gardner identifies the inventive White Knight as Carroll's self-insert: AA 296. Jones and Gladstone, on the other hand, point to Alfred Tennyson, making the White Knight a spoof of his heroic ideas: 148–149.

the mother cat Dinah with the egg Humpty Dumpty – although she is "not sure" about the latter (AA 341–343). The title of chapter XII bridges the two worlds as well and spells out the question that remains: "Which dreamed it?", Alice or the Red King?

Earlier, when the mirror-twins Tweedledee and Tweedledum showed the sleeping Red King to Alice, she had already grasped just how grave this question is. The reality – or unreality – of Alice's existence and of her surroundings had been discussed in remarkably spatial terms: "'[I]f he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?' – 'Where I am now, of course,' said Alice. – 'Not you!' Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. 'You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!'" (AA 238).

Like Carroll reiterated in his *Sylvie and Bruno* books anew and even more clearly, the one linking dream world and real world is the narrator, by recounting both. Ultimately and more obviously, this would identify Carroll with the Red King. But in both books, Alice is not only indicated as the dreamer, she also retells her own adventures to her older sister (AA 162–163, 334–335), making her transformative dreams reflect back to her affirmed existence (through her sister and her living situation) as a "little girl" and actively creating points of reference between the worlds.

After Alice has told her about her "wonderful dream" of Wonderland and "ran off," Alice's sister is inspired to dream on herself, but she is older and for her, the dream is bittersweet: "So she sat on, with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality [...]" (AA 162–163) For Alice, who just escaped a world of circularity, confusion, distortion, abuse, but also autonomy, this draws quite a bleak future with only one single option: "Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman ... how she would gather about her other little children, and make *their* eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago ... remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days" (AA 164).

The trust that her sister has in Alice's memory is surprising, considering that both in Wonderland and in Looking-Glass land and alongside the various bodily transformations and roles that Alice adapts, memory, accounting, and narration are very misleading things: Alice constantly forgets or misremembers facts – even her own name and age – , stories, and poems. In the strange dream lands she seeks her way through, the mythical and metaphorical becomes truth, while literal meaning, parody, and satire take the place of common sense meaning, verbatim rendition, and comprehensibility.

The Looking-Glass tale ends on a much less certain note, with Alice and her cats still musing who dreamt up the adventures experienced and the narrator, at last, turning to their audience: "Which do *you* think it was?" (AA 344). The terminal poem recalls one more time the "boat, beneath a sunny sky" where the story of Alice was conceived, to close: "Life, what is it but a dream?" (AA 345). While this ending is melancholic and highlights the inevitable loss of ease and dreams of childhood, there also is an element of openness to it that is lacking at the end of the Wonderland book: the agency not only of Alice, but also of the reader is restored and underlined, and the question of living and persisting through the acts of perception and creation is an undeniably inclusive one.

The trip that Wendy and her brothers go on to Neverland is certainly not a dream: they left their parents behind, in very real grief and sorrow. The absence of their children has different effects on the couple – while Mrs. Darling is "too fond of her rubbishly children," making sure "the window is open" for their return, her husband blames and punishes himself by living in the dog kennel: "he was quite a simple man; indeed he might have passed for a boy again if he had been able to take his baldness off" (PP 164–166). Mr. Darling's regression is played for laughs, even after the children are back and all the lost boys are properly adopted into the Darling family, but it is Mrs. Darling's selfless and sacrificing motherhood that the author emphasizes and that convinces Peter Pan to give up Wendy and his friends and leave them in the human world (PP 168–169). The Neverland counterpart for Mrs. Darling's reproductive motherhood is not Wendy, who only plays being a mother in Neverland, but the "Never bird" who almost sacrifices her hatching eggs to save Peter's life (PP 101–103). This becomes clear when Peter wants Wendy to come back with him, and Mrs. Darling forbids it. "But he does so need a mother," Wendy argues, and her mother answers: "So do you, my love" (PP 175). The three – Peter, Wendy, and Mrs. Darling – make the ominous arrangement to "let Wendy go to him for a week every year to do his spring cleaning" (PP 176). Wendy, who

is still young enough to fly to Neverland but is in text not treated as a child like her brothers and the lost boys, has adopted a thoroughly asexual motherhood that manifests itself in domestic and care work and in *storytelling*.

In Neverland and for Peter Pan, narration is essential: like in Wonderland, memory is a fleeting thing, and the children, as soon as they arrive, start forgetting. "Wendy, you see, had been forgetting too," but "nobly anxious to do her duty, she tried to fix the old life in their minds by setting them examination papers on it" (PP 80–81), and later she romanticizes her own nuclear family life by telling it in a story (113–116). For Peter Pan, who never grows up and thus has "no sense of time" (PP 176) and no possibility of recollection, life is cyclical. To have constant identity and continuity, he relies on his "mothers," his storytellers, to fix time into periods: before Wendy, her mother accompanied him, and after Wendy grows up, he will take her daughter Jane to do "his spring cleaning," and then her daughter Margaret. "When Margaret grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter's mother in turn; and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless" (PP 185). Cycling from one generation to another, asexual turns into reproductive motherhood, and in a parental dynamic both sides nurture what is constructed as the central thing that gets left behind in the process of growing up, the embodiment of childhood: Peter Pan, who observes and thrives through family life, but has no active part in it whatsoever.

There lies a deep existential dread at the heart of this, which is the basis for the otherness in the character of Peter Pan: before the backdrop of motherhood (asexual and reproductive) and fatherhood (of benign neglect by Mr. Darling and aggressive abuse by Hook), Peter just refuses, opening up childhood as a negative. His rejection of growing up is purposefully evading what is considered normalcy: "'I don't want ever to be a man,' he said with passion. 'I want always to be a little boy and to have fun. So I ran away to Kensington Gardens and lived a long long time among the fairies" (PP 28). It is an escape that the text emphatically although ironically validates: the lost boys who, for want of an "ordinary" family, were adopted into the Darling household, soon realize "what goats they had been not to remain on the island; but it was too late now, and soon they settled down to being as ordinary as you or me or Jenkins minor" (PP 176). They forget again: to fly and to tell stories, with only Wendy, now in the place of her mother, holding on to Peter through the nurturing of her own child. Peter, in turn, is forgetful of enemies and friends alike, creating a codependence between fleeing myth and capturing storytelling, a shifting and shaping that comes down to the essence of narration itself that never stands still and changes while it repeats. What is, on the surface, presented as the tale of an eternal child turns out to be a cruel *memento mori*, like the ticking clock of the Neverland crocodile that the immortal Peter mimics, threatening his adult enemy Hook directly with his rapidly expiring lifetime (PP 147–148). He is, paradoxically and unsettlingly, a force of death with a youthful face, picking up on the Pan myth and his otherworldly origins in Kensington Gardens among birds and fairies. This ambivalence runs deeply and fundamentally, and in Neverland Peter Pan makes sure the Never bird can hatch his eggs, just like he leaves Wendy with Mrs. Darling so she can grow up, while he murders and forgets loved ones and foes alike.

The unease is two-fold, just as the threat of oblivion runs in two directions: of Peter and of "ordinary" boys who grow up and get left behind. By picking up the narration tactic to battle this existential forgetfulness just like Wendy does, the author himself adopts her asexual motherhood, repeating the cycle of narration on a meta-level, and, simultaneously and inadvertently, deepening the relating existential dread of inadequacy, loneliness, and loss. When observing the Darling couple without their children, the readers are told: "This is all we are, lookers-on. Nobody really wants us" (PP 164).

At the Tail End: Lost and Found Things

What the Tortoise Said to Achilles is a short logical contribution by Carroll that, in the spirit of the Alice books, discusses one of Zeno's paradoxes by positioning the two characters in a logical dispute about their situation: The Greek warrior Achilles is, according to Zeno, not able to catch up with the infinitely slower tortoise. In satirizing form that humanizes the tortoise and humbles the hero figure, a skeptical, scholarly

problem clashes with a seemingly certain, conventional belief. The tension between the very real paradox and the fruitlessness of its discussion is not solved when the narrator "having pressing business at the Bank" leaves "the happy pair" (693). When he sees them again "some months afterward," they are still discussing, and go on to rename each other, according to their whims. In *The Little White Bird*, Barrie's old bachelor protagonist muses about his fosterling: "When David meets Achilles I know what will happen. The little boy will take the hero by the hand, call him father, and drag him away to some Round Pond" (14).

To fully grasp Alice's and Peter's characterizations and gender ambiguities, Carroll's and Barrie's different approaches to authorship need to be considered. While both the manuscript for *Alice in Wonderland* and the stage play that originated *Peter Pan* had their beginnings in private storytelling to the authors' respective child friends, Carroll's and Barrie's societal and professional backgrounds can be found in the contents and forms of their finalized texts. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* merge sophisticated logical paradoxes with societal parodies in the guise of a nonsense-form aimed at children. *Peter Pan* links sentimentalized autobiographical aspects with elements of fairy tales and contemporary adventure literature. While ultimately differing in form and end result, both authors implement an underlying rupture element into the Never-, Wonder-, and Looking-Glass lands they create that fundamentally disturbs the societal set of rules they promote at first glance. This element is intrinsic in the child hero figures of Alice and Peter, who continue to break up the harmonious or not-so-harmonious happenings in their surroundings.

Alice as the hero subverts the rules of the heroic tale – even if she herself might puzzle over it sometimes, neither narrator nor illustrator forget once that she is supposed to be a "little girl," that, in her journey through strange lands, becomes universally human, adapting, changing, and growing. As a "small female child" Alice sidesteps classical heroic demands, going astray but still getting *somewhere* (Hourihan 207). In Wonderland and Looking-Glass land settings, pathos and authorities are ridiculed ruthlessly, and Alice's uncertainty and insecurity, combined with courage and curiosity, are valuable virtues. She is heroic in her search – even if she does not know, what for, partaking in a dream metamorphosis that she might salvage into the real world. By blurring the distinctions between alive–lifeless, animal–human, real–unreal, and male–female, the "queer" mixture of creatures of the lands Alice visits evades typification and classification. They also allow focus on the two binaries that remain untouched: the subject in their surroundings and the narrator and their audience. Twisting and turning transforms common sense into nonsense, but nonsense needs an audience "in the know" to appreciate it. Alice is part of the "mad" crowd and skips out of it. Awakened from her dreams, she has not vanished, like Tweedledee threatened, making her the one who dreams and who reflects upon it, participant and narrator, object and subject of her own story. She belongs and does not belong: she interlinks and transgresses.

When Hourihan points out the connection of Peter Pan's war games with colonial violence and the war euphoria at the dawn of World War I, she is historically and ideologically correct. But in ascribing violence as the "essence of maleness" to Peter Pan (101), she misses one crucial aspect of his character: Peter Pan himself will, unlike his belligerent peers, never grow up, he will never partake in the Great War. Picking up on the tradition of cross-dressing actresses for the Peter Pan-role, Garber asks: "Why is Peter Pan played by a woman?", and answers: "Because a woman will never grow up to be a man" (168). Peter might be a "boy" in text, but no "ordinary," a "wonderful" one – he is "not one" of "the boys and girls" (PP 94, 137). The company of fairies he keeps in Neverland suggests options beyond the gender binary, as Wendy explains: "[...] the mauve ones are boys and the white ones are girls, and the blue ones are just little sillies who are not sure what they are" (PP 175). In *The Little White Bird*, the old bird Solomon Caw calls Peter Pan a "poor little half-and-half," a "Betwixt-and-Between," neither a human nor a bird (140).

While "Everyman" Alice (Hourihan 207) is in constant transformation and doubt, the main gesture of the "whimsical, fairy creature" and "loveable tomboy" Peter (Garber 167) is refusal: he refuses to grow, to age, to have a family. The former is tied closely to timely changes while the latter falls out of time altogether. In the context of Victorian and Edwardian children's literature that links the chronological passing of time with growing up and gendering into a family hierarchy, Alice's and Peter's *a*historical quests allow room for gender transgressions in a conservative cloak, concealed by the textual disguises of fun and games, of paradoxes and maternal narration.

Imposing on and *othering* their respective child hero, both Carroll and Barrie in their maternal act rely on being *othered* themselves by their audience, as storytelling is in itself transformative and interactive in its repetition and its interpretation. The "interpretative absorption of the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (*yet?*) have resolved into a sexual specificity of proscribed object choice, aim, site, or identification" (Sedgwick 2) searches and tests for flaws and weak points in supposed established and cohesive systems. So far, many of the reinterpretations of Alice's and Peter's adventures have reinforced the conservative, binary, and imperialistic tendencies that are undeniable in the texts, to the point of modernizing them to fit into a hypermodern context (Primorac 134–147). But interpretations like a lesbian staging of Peter Pan – with all the consequences that entails (Rose XII–XIII) – point to what might be: a call to adopt the dream child and make them one's own.

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