

All sorts of pitfalls and surprises: Competing Views of Idealized Girlhood in Lewis Carroll's Alice Books.

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"All sorts of pitfalls and surprises":

Competing Views of Idealized Girlhood in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* Books

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

The *Alice* frames encourage readers to interpret Alice's adventures as fairy tales, a category that in nineteenth-century usage includes literary [End Page 1] and traditional tales, nonsense, and what we would now call fantasy fiction. In mid-Victorian discourse, fairy tales often exert a recognizably domestic influence on their readers or listeners. Contemporary periodical articles and reviews commonly portray the tales' virtues as analogous to an ideal home's: readers young and old will find their sympathies awakened and the corrosive effects of an amoral, competitive, and violent world lessened.² *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*, like many Victorian texts, thus characterize the values inscribed in idealized childhood and its tales as domestic and feminine. The *Wonderland* frames suggest that the tale of Alice's dream fosters the happy, loving childhood that will enable her development into a good woman and mother, while the *Looking-Glass* frames anticipate that the tale will create a domestic space powerful enough to keep the stormy world at bay.

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

Articles

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