

Introduction



Lewis Carroll
(Charles
Dodgson), age 8.

One of the best-loved and most scrutinized texts after Shakespeare and the Bible is the brace of *Alice* books, *Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, written for a pair of real Alices by the pseudonymous Lewis Carroll; it would seem implausible that there is any aspect of them left unexamined; yet there is one large-scale motif running through the two books that has essentially escaped critical attention - the pervasive mediaeval theme.

It is remarkable that there seem to have been no previous suggestions for the sources of what is really the main context of the *Alice* stories, the mediaeval temperament of many of the characters. Much has been made of the Victorian underpinnings of the tales, and they have been analysed from an impressively diverse range of perspectives. But, for some curious reason, the issue of the deep historical sources of the story lines seems never to have been addressed in the plethora of analyses of the works. How it could have escaped scrutiny, given the prevalence of the mediaeval themes throughout both texts, is difficult to understand, but the present treatment attempts to correct this omission with an extended comparison of numerous aspects of the sequences of events to those of the 12th century royal courts, in particular.

The Victorian sources for the Lewis Carroll's concepts and conceits - he was an Oxford don whose real name was Charles Dodgson - have been extensively discussed, but the mediaeval scenario of much

of the two works has always been taken as purely mythological and generic. This book focuses on the remarkable parallels between the travails of the fictional Alice and a historical Alice who lived in the time of the knights and castles, duchesses and chess games that figure so largely in the narrative. This earlier Alice spent her life as a trading pawn of the Plantagenet and Capetian monarchs of England and France, a lost soul on the checkered board of 12th century territorial intrigues. She was a



Alice after trying
the 'Eat Me' cake.
Tenniel (1865).



Eleanor of
Aquitaine
(2011).



Chartres
Cathedral:
possibly Eleanor
(12th century).

daughter of Louis VII of France named as Alice of the Vexin, an aptly eponymous territory that has been the site of struggles between the English and continental powers from the 10th to the 20th centuries. For much of her life she was held hostage by the Plantagenet court, successively held as a bargaining chip by Queen Eleanor and Kings Henry II, Richard the Lionheart and John. It must have been quite an education, and it seems that Dodgson drew on many aspects of her story in his efforts to beguile the young Alice Liddell on their boat trips between Oxford and Woodstock, the historical sites of two of the principal castles that served as the courts of these protagonists (and where both the Plantagenet princes were born).



Princess Alice's
daughter, Marie
de Ponthieu
(1230).

Charles Dodgson was a professional mathematician with extensive interests in Victorian politics and theology, the recent fad of photography and nonsense poetry. He studied classics at Rugby School and was reputedly a friend of Tennyson, the renowned mediaevalist and promulgator of the legends of King Arthur. But that was the early Middle Ages and there is no hint of the spirit of Arthur, Lancelot, Guinevere, Excalibar or Camelot in the *Alice* books. Instead they are imbued with the late Middle Ages themes of dukes, jousting, escutcheons, crusades, castles and chatelaines. This is the era of the Henrys and Eleanors that established the monarchy in the psyche of the country, building waves of castles and reconstituting the aristocracy after the depredations of the Norman conquerors. It is this era that provides the historical texture of the *Alice* books, the backdrop of the then contemporary Victorian themes that run through the stories.



Rev. Dodgson's
Church in Croft-
on-Tees
(12th century).

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Parallel Alices propounds a thesis for which there is little solid evidence in Dodgson's life. To account for the prevalence of late mediaeval themes in the *Alice* books, we have to envisage an entire undercurrent of Dodgson's childhood in his father's vicarage where he grew up. As a boy he was a prodigious reader, reputed to have read John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* by the age of 7, and writing and editing various family magazines by the age of 12 (such as the *Rector's Umbrella* depicted on the right). Here again there is no clear evidence of an interest in



Frontispiece: The Rector's
Umbrella (-1849-50).

knights and damsels, but we must suppose that he became familiar with them, much as any boy of the time is likely to have done.

At Rugby, he read mathematics and classics. There is, however, little trace in the *Alice* books of an interest in the gods and voyages that he would have encountered in the classics curriculum. Perhaps Alice's journeys through the menagerie of characters could be regarded as deriving metaphorically from the Homeric voyages, and indeed this might make an interesting literary endeavour (though to my knowledge no-one has attempted to follow this avenue of analysis), but there is certainly no explicit mention of any classical allusions in either of the *Alice* books, popular though that form of literary trope had been in the century leading up to the generation of the *Alice* themes. Dodgson's exposure to the classics does not seem to have stirred him in the way the chivalric era did.



Crest and Quad of Rugby School.

Almost the sole evidence, outside the *Alice* books, of a previous interest in the mediaeval period is a poem that Dodgson wrote in 1875, when he was 43, of which the second verse goes:

I have a saddle — "Say'st thou soe?
Wyth styrrupes, Knyghte, to boote?"
I sayde not that — , I woote:
Yt ys a mutton-saddel, loe!
Parte of ye fleecye brute.

In Edward A. Levenston, 1992, p. 44

This brief foray into pastiche betrays a deeper interest in mediaevalism that forms the lapidary backdrop to the *Alice* stories and makes it plausible that the extensive links drawn to the historical escapades of the late 12th century are not a figment of the imagination but a reflection of the rich inner life of this denizen of one of the principal repositories of historical chronicles from which he seems to have drawn.



Leg of the Mutton.
John Tenniel (1870).



Alice (frontispiece). Arthur Rackham (1907).

The one leading connection is the young Dodgson's avid interest in Shakespeare's plays, which he would attend whenever he had the opportunity. In particular, it seems likely that he attended the 1858 performance of Shakespeare's *King John* at the Princess's Theatre in Oxford Street, London, featuring Ellen Terry as Prince Arthur, a child star in whom he noted as of particular interest in his diary from a previous performance. Many of the 12th century characters identified here as likely sources of *Alice* characters in the present analysis play prominent roles in the play. Elinor (Eleanor) of Aquitaine is described in terms echoed in the Queen of Hearts in *Alice*:

"With him along is come the mother-queen,
An Ate, stirring him to blood and strife;
With her her niece, the Lady Blanch of Spain;"

William Shakespeare, King John, Act II.

In addition to Eleanor, the play encompasses Henry II, Louis VII, Phillip Augustus, Richard Coeur de Lion, Constance Duchess of Brittany and Blanche of Castile, not to mention knights, battles, heralds, coats of arms; the whole mediaeval panoply.

Thus, beyond the history courses that he took during his years at Rugby, Dodgson's exposure to the mediaeval subject matter of the Shakespeare plays could have been a significant source of background material that inspired the settings for the *Alice* books.



Henry II and Eleanor
(14th century).