Three Times in Wonderland

Anna Kerchy

Nothing proves more the challenging, often confounding nature of visual culture 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 years after its initial 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 Through the Looking-Glass. The twofold weighing in the postmillennial discussion of this inscrutably curious textual corpus are all specialists of nineteen-century and children's literature who fuse their philological skills with exciting research agenda-setting for the post- or transnational universe. His love of control over the publishing, 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 Gandal'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 anecdotes for adults and children alike, from the earliest cinematic takes to Alice in music videos. As Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, readers may indeed be surprised by a few new episodes complementing the well-known anecdotes for adults and children alike, from the earliest cinematic takes to Alice in music videos.

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. Although the section remains more descriptive than argumentative and strangely fails to refer to any seminal theoretical frameworks which could prevent the authors from making the same mistake as Benjamin Lefebvre's uninteresting take on the novellist's 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 derided 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* (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 interpretative 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 impression of games from the kiteme's game of romps with the ball of worsted to apparent meaninglessness through manifold connotations related to the Alice theme. Iché's intricate web of allusions does contain genuine and innovative insights. She demonstrates how topics of general interest for nineteenth century audiences were interlaced with tales from antiquity, mystical and alchemical medicine, and paranoid 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's crystal ball and the Mousetrap in *Alices 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...