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Curious Appetites: Food, Desire, Gender and Subjectivity in Lewis Carroll's Alice Texts

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The Lion and the Unicorn

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 32, Number 1, January 2008

pp. 22-39

10.1353/uni.2008.0004

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Curious Appetites:
Food, Desire, Gender and Subjectivity in Lewis Carroll's
Alice Texts

Carina Garland (bio)

Lewis Carroll's *Alice* texts are all about "malice" (Cohen, *Interviews* 108): that is, the often spiteful attempts of the male author to suppress and control Alice's agency so that Carroll can desire and own her. This control, and the anxieties Carroll has surrounding female sexuality and agency, are expressed via representations of food and appetite within the text and the relationship of these to the feminine. There has always been something unnerving about Lewis Carroll's Alice as one very early reviewer of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* noticed in 1868: "We enjoy the walk with Alice through Wonderland [but] now and then, perhaps, something disturbing almost wakes us from our dream" (Sigler xii). What that "something disturbing" is has been the subject of considerable interest for critics for some time, with the more recent reading of the Alice texts exploring aspects of control and desire in the texts, particularly in terms of gender and agency. As Carolyn Sigler notes, "Along with many other interpretations, the *Alice* books have consistently been read as portrayals of the experience of growing up and the construction of agency and identity" (xiv). The contemporary studies of the texts by Sigler and especially U. C. Knoepfelmacher have contributed to discussion of the Alice texts in terms of growing up, agency, and identity by recognizing the differences that exist—in terms of power, in particular—between *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass*. However, it is the contention of this article that the recent analyses of the Alice texts have misrepresented, misplaced, and misinterpreted the specificities of the gendered power dynamic present in the books. This is due to the fact that the recent standout studies in the field (Auerbach; Knoepfelmacher) have been eager to see Alice as a subversive, active, empowered heroine. Additionally, some recent studies (Auerbach; Kincaid; and Knoepfelmacher in particular) either don't argue for a gendered power struggle in the texts, or, if they do, find that Alice—as opposed [End Page 22] to the controlling male author—wins. This study will show, in various ways particularly surrounding the presence/absence of food and hunger within the texts that the recent studies in the area are flawed as they do not correctly recognize the fundamental repression/hatred of adult female sexuality within the texts and Carroll's often perverse

attempts to quell this repulsive sexuality in his child heroine, Alice.

Crucial to this analysis, is the shift between the two Alice texts as it has not been discussed extensively in the past. Recent analyses (Knoepfmacher; Nelson; Sigler) have all noticed that there is a marked difference in the way Alice is portrayed and idealized between *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass*, but these studies have failed to fully appreciate the significance of the shift in terms of the controlling male gaze and female sexuality. This study contends that *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass* both make similar comments about female sexuality: that is, it's a frightening and destructive force. The ways these ideas are expressed, however, and the positioning of desire and femininity in the texts, are quite different. Basically, *Wonderland* is about possession whereas *Looking Glass* is about loss. The anxieties surrounding these themes are much more complex than this statement suggests and this is examined extensively in this study, particularly in relation to food and appetite. As Catherine Driscoll has indicated, the Alice texts read in the context of Carroll's own anxieties, "enable questions about relations between girlhood and feminine adolescence" (42) to be asked. These questions enable an analysis of the Alice texts that move away from the tendency to give the heroine power as it becomes clear that the little girl is controlled and manipulated by the male author, as a result of his anxieties surrounding her move from girlhood into adolescence.

Despite the well-intentioned attempts by critics (Auerbach; Honig; Kincaid; Knoepfmacher) to read Alice as a subversive, active heroine in the past, this analysis concludes that such interpretations have been misplaced and have ignored the placement of women in the texts as well as the desiring nature of the male gaze. The...



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