PART ONE

“WAKE UP, ALICE DEAR”

UNRULY ALICE: A FEMINIST VIEW OF SOME ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

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"Come to class ready to discuss and defend your favorite fairy-tale heroine," I told my students in "Unruly Women through the Ages." The course began as a survey of feminist archetypes and issues, but it quickly became a forum for a group of rather unruly female students aged eighteen to twenty-two to discuss candidly topics such as date rape, abortion, sexual harassment, battered women, male and female relationships, anorexia and bulimia, and what it means to be a woman today. For one class period, we turned to the realm of fairy tales. To my initial question, I expected students to write about Little Red Riding Hood or Goldilocks, but most students chose a Disney princess—Cinderella, Ariel, Belle, Mulan, mostly unruly females going against the flow of male rules imposed upon them. Two students, however, chose Alice as their favorite unruly fairy tale character. They argued that

Alice, unlike other fairy-tale heroines, requires no fairy godmother, huntsman, or good fairy—just her own wits and ingenuity—to navigate through Wonderland successfully, keeping her head intact. My students know Alice not through Carroll but through Disney, and this Disney heroine Alice is a precursor to the strong Belle and Mulan and counter to the pliable Cinderella and the passive Aurora and Snow White, who require male aid to bring them to life and reality again.

In Carroll's or Disney's version, Alice's journey through Wonderland has long been seen as a tale of identity, agency, and adulthood. The curiosity and confidence that Carroll instills in Alice connect her with other unruly women we studied in class, such as Lysistrata, Shakespeare's Kate, Emma Bovary, Marie Antoinette, Marilyn Monroe, Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, Camille Paglia, Pandora, and Eve. Alice's direct, candid approach to life is refreshing and something the young women in my class can relate to. They understand the story of a young woman who has the world before her, ready to embark on life, who changes herself, primarily by eating and drinking, to fit in. She encounters all types, tests herself, tastes life around her, and once she learns the right combination to fit in and be comfortable with herself, she's welcomed into a beautiful world where she possesses wisdom, power, and prestige.[1]

Nice Girls Don't Make History

As if by instinct, Alice follows the White Rabbit down the hole "never once considering how in the world she was to get out again."[2] Landing, she feels no fear, but rather engages in her surroundings and wonders how far she has fallen. "At such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling downstairs!"[3] This self-assurance and unquestioning spirit, this Pandora mentality or, as some would say reckless, wild, impetuous streak, is also the kind of indomitable spirit today's young women appreciate.

Alice rejects and frees herself from stereotypical female traits; she is not trapped by the confines of roles or requirements. First, she rejects the world her sister occupies; then in her journey through Wonderland she questions the nurturing role of mother; and finally she stands up to seemingly powerful females and males alike, including the Queen of Hearts, the Caterpillar, the Mad Hatter, and the Cheshire Cat. Alice's confident attitude leads her safely through Wonderland and she begins "to think that very few things indeed were really impossible," a message young women of today need to keep in mind.[4] Plucky, undaunted, and impervious to the dangers that may lie in Wonderland, Alice is a curious, empowered seven-year-old girl eager to delve into a new world she chooses to enter. What a wonderful model for our young women to look up to!

Alice's intrepid attitude elicits some criticism, however. In Carroll's original and Disney's rendition, Alice may seem abrasive. As my students came to realize in our historical survey, society all too often ridicules strong women, interpreting assertive actions as aggressive and transgressive. The powerful, autonomous woman to some may be the impetuous, reckless, and unruly woman to others. Indeed, Alice eats and drinks what she sees, intrudes, barges in, takes her seat at the tea party uninvited, hears a squeaking pencil from one juror and takes it from him,[5] uses her intellect to solve problems, and frequently speaks her mind—everything young women should do. Nice girls don't make history, after all. Alice is assertive, and unfortunately, almost 150 years after Carroll's publication, in Wonderland and today that assertiveness can still seem pushy, forward, and aggressive.

Alice is not like the other females in Carroll's stories, and this contrast appeals to my students and makes Alice an important female advocate. Even before she enters Wonderland, Alice has begun to reject the female reality her sister has chosen, a passive compliance, fulfilling a traditional female role. Her sister

presents one vision of women, those well educated with little to do. Reading a book "without pictures or conversations" is of no use to Alice, and she seeks other means to occupy herself.[6] Next she contemplates making a daisy chain but wonders "whether the pleasure of making a daisy chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daises."[7] Significantly, the White Rabbit appears as Alice questions this busywork that would garner no productive results. Neither sitting and reading nor making daisy chains, Alice follows the White Rabbit down the hole and thus chooses an active function within the world, even if that world is Wonderland.

Motherhood Is Not a Requirement

Alice's journey in Wonderland begins with a rejection of one female stereotype, the idle woman, embodied in her sister reading to while away the time. Continuing her journey in Wonderland, Alice learns more about the power of women when she literally opens the door for herself. In chapter VI, "Pig and Pepper," Alice finds herself at the Duchess's door and knocks, but to no avail. This exchange between Alice and the Frog-Footman follows:

> "But what am *I* to do?" said Alice.
>
> "Anything you like," said the Footman, and began whistling.
>
> "Oh, there's no use in talking to him," said Alice desperately: "he's perfectly idiotic!" And she opened the door and went in.[8]

Her inability to enter the house through conventional means, acting the proper, demure female, causes Alice to question her situation: "What am *I* to do?" The Frog-Footman's response, "Anything you like," opens up all possibilities for her. Here she learns that the norms of society that she may follow really mean very little. She has the power to do anything

within herself, a theme that recurs throughout Carroll's works. Alice's message for today—in Wonderland and the world at large—is that young women can do anything they like.

The world of possibility for women that Wonderland offers Alice includes an indifferent perspective toward motherhood, which in Victorian England (and in some places still today) was the primary function of women. Alice views the pride and pitfalls of maternity with a great deal of detachment. The Pigeon presents Alice with her first look at motherhood, a mother who expresses the suffering that comes with that role. Their meeting begins with the Pigeon beating a long-necked Alice.

> "Serpent!" screamed the Pigeon.
>
> "I'm *not* a serpent!" said Alice indignantly. "Let me alone!"
>
> "Serpent, I say again!" repeated the Pigeon, but in a more subdued tone, and added, with a kind of sob, "I've tried every way, but nothing seems to suit them! . . .
>
> "I've tried the roots of trees, and I've tried banks, and I've tried hedges," the Pigeon went on, without attending to her; "but those serpents! There's no pleasing them! . . .
>
> "As if it wasn't trouble enough hatching the eggs," said the Pigeon; but I must be on the look-out for serpents, night and day! Why, I haven't had a wink of sleep these three weeks!"
>
> "I'm very sorry you've been annoyed," said Alice, who was beginning to see its meaning.
>
> "And just as I'd taken the highest tree in the wood," continued the Pigeon, raising its voice to a shriek, "and just as I was thinking I should be free of them at last, they must needs come wriggling down from the sky! Ugh, Serpent!"
>
> "But I'm *not* a serpent, I tell you!" said Alice. "I'm a—I'm a— . . .

> "I—I'm a little girl," said Alice rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day.
>
> "A likely story indeed!" said the Pigeon in a tone of the deepest contempt. "I've seen a good many little girls in my time, but never *one* with such a neck as that! No, no! You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!"
>
> "I *have* tasted eggs, certainly," said Alice, who was a very truthful child; "but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know. . . .
>
> "I'm not looking for eggs, as it happens; and, if I was, I shouldn't want *yours*."[9]

In this exchange, Alice fails to commiserate with the Pigeon's state as the maternally inclined might do, but instead apologizes for annoying her. Alice's line, "little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do," even resonates with today's pro-life/pro-choice discussion. The Pigeon names long-necked Alice a serpent; not rejecting this role for the Pigeon's maternal one, Alice aligns herself with the serpent, predator to pigeons and eggs; rejects maternity, at least for the time being; and claims her autonomy.

Alice next encounters the maternal life of the Duchess. The ugly Duchess nurses a howling baby in a smoky kitchen. To contemporary readers, Carroll's Duchess figures as a stereotypical white-trash mother, one who screams at her child, fails to consider its well-being (in a smoke-filled room with flying debris just missing it), and accompanies her sadistic song not with soothing rocks but severe shakes at every line. Tired of her crying child, the Duchess finally flings the baby at Alice and departs to do something better, like "play croquet with the Queen."[10] Today, this Duchess could be arrested for shaken baby syndrome or be demonized, like Britney Spears

and Casey Anthony, and plastered all over the media.[11] Alice, herself, sees how unfit for motherhood the Duchess is, remarking, "If I don't take this child away with me . . . they're sure to kill it in a day or two."[12] Alice's disregard for the Duchess surfaces again when she learns that the Duchess, a prisoner of the Queen, is to be executed.

> "What for?" said Alice.
>
> "Did you say 'What a pity!'?" the Rabbit asked.
>
> "No, I didn't," said Alice. "I don't think it's at all a pity."[13]

Alice catches the Duchess's strange child, which ultimately transforms into a pig, and her indifferent treatment of it offers another view of motherhood. No cooing, tickling, or speaking baby talk; she first chastises the child, saying, "Don't grunt, . . . that's not at all a proper way of expressing yourself."[14] Unlike so many stereotypical women, Alice does not exhibit "cute baby syndrome," seeing any infant as darling, no matter how ugly, simply because it's small. Indeed, "Alice did not like the look of the thing at all."[15]

> "If you're going to turn into a pig, my dear," said Alice, seriously, "I'll have nothing more to do with you. Mind now!" . . .
>
> Alice was just beginning to think to herself, "Now, what am I to do with this creature, when I get it home?" when it grunted again, so violently, that she looked down into its face in some alarm. This time there could be *no* mistake about it: it was neither more nor less than a pig, and she felt that it would be quite absurd for her to carry it any further.
>
> So she set the little creature down, and felt quite relieved to see it trot away quietly into the wood.[16]

While I might not hire Alice as a baby-sitter or pet-sitter, I'm happy to see a young woman honestly show her attitude

toward children. Not sympathetic to the Pigeon's complaints nor surprised that the Duchess is imprisoned, Alice exhibits a rational, contemporary view of motherhood, a view my students share. For them, and perhaps for Carroll, motherhood is not a requirement for worth.

What Would Alice Do?

Alice's independent spirit takes her to the all-male world of the Mad Hatter's tea party. "No room," they all cry when they see her coming. But this doesn't sway her a bit. "There's *plenty* of room!" she declares "indignantly."[17] The Mad Hatter's tea party presents an assertive female in a male world. She gets stuck at a very messy table (like frat brothers, March Hare, Dormouse, and Mad Hatter prefer to move to the next spot rather than do any washing up), and Alice eventually understands that while she's free to join them, she's not obliged to be a part of their world.

The exchange between Alice and the guests at the Mad Hatter's tea party is particularly abrasive and shows us how Alice has grown (not just physically) in her journey through Wonderland. Here she speaks more freely, asks questions, objects to what someone says, challenges rude remarks, and attempts to engage in the wordplay between the Mad Hatter, the Dormouse, and March Hare. She wants to keep up with the boys, and indeed she succeeds in this male world of teacups and chatter. However, a direct threat to her very intellect forces her to leave. After the Dormouse's story, this exchange takes place:

> "Really, now you ask me," said Alice, very much confused, "I don't think—"
>
> "Then you shouldn't talk," said the Hatter.
>
> This piece of rudeness was more than Alice could bear: she got up in great disgust, and walked off.[18]

The Mad Hatter's glib remark sounds all too familiar as women, even contemporary ones, try to advance in the

workplace. The Mad Hatter requires quick thinking but fails to see the intellect in a seven-year-old who has used her own wits to make it this far into Wonderland. The misogynist Mad Hatter disrespects methodical and contemplative Alice and, like his cohorts, couldn't care less when she departs: "the Dormouse fell asleep instantly, and neither of the others took the least notice of her going."[19] Although Alice, the new young woman in this old-boy network, doesn't put up with their harassment, she leaves, "look[ing] back once or twice, half hoping that they would call after her"[20]; thus she may want to be part of their world, as she looks back with some remorse. However, her decision to depart this chauvinistic space gains her the garden she has sought from her first arrival in Wonderland, and with it comes respect. Once in the garden, Alice is honored for who she is; the cards bow low before her.[21]

Another affront to Alice's intellect comes from a female who wants Alice to display stereotypically passive female traits. In contrast to the sexist Mad Hatter, who requires women to think in his presence but doesn't give them a chance, Carroll presents the other extreme, the Duchess, who wants Alice to take a "dumb blonde" approach to life. Thanks to Alice, the Duchess has been summoned out of jail to discuss the Cheshire Cat. Alice is surprised to find the Duchess in a good mood, which she attributes to the pepper in her kitchen;[22] however, the absence of a child and thus the Duchess's child care duties may be the real reason for a change in her disposition. Even without a child, the Duchess still irritates Alice, first physically and then intellectually. A number of times Alice notes how "*very* ugly" she is[23]; she's also the right size to rest her chin on Alice's shoulder, digging into it uncomfortably. The Duchess walks with Alice spewing morals for everything, actually mindless clichés to fill the time, digging her chin into Alice's shoulder all the while. On two occasions, the Duchess questions Alice's thought. "You're thinking about something, my dear, and that makes you forget to talk," says the Duchess,

reinforcing the stereotype of the talkative woman and encouraging Alice to conform.[24]

> "Thinking again?" the Duchess asked, with another dig of her sharp little chin.
>
> "I've a right to think," said Alice sharply, for she was beginning to feel a little worried.
>
> "Just about as much right," said the Duchess, "as pigs have to fly."[25]

Digging her chin into Alice's shoulder, the Duchess underscores this infuriating verbal reprimand, shared by all too many even today. Like the Mad Hatter before her, the Duchess attempts to put Alice in her place, but throughout Wonderland, Alice alters, changes, and acts to satisfy herself.

Alice displays her intellect in one final growth spurt when she is asked to testify at the Knave's trial. Here she speaks her mind to the figure in power, the King, not the Queen, who orders her out of the court according to "Rule Forty-two—*All persons more than a mile high to leave the court.*"[26] She astutely challenges this rule, remains to hear more evidence, and finally calls the court what it is: "You're nothing but a pack of cards!"[27] Her defiance at the tea party provides her access to the garden; this defiant move transports her to reality. A curious, inquisitive girl at the beginning of her journey in Wonderland, by this time she has grown larger again and regains her full size. Her physical growth mirrors her social, psychological, and emotional development. Alice has become a large, powerful presence, a fully realized young woman who is ready to challenge anyone, especially those who obfuscate the truth. In fact, the truth sets her free and wakens her into reality once again.

Unflappable, confident, assertive, no Cinderella complex here: Alice is not simply a little Victorian girl having an adventure; she is a model for the twenty-first-century woman. Alice bravely enters into a new world and takes care of herself. Who wouldn't want a self-confident figure like Alice to look up to?

Alice's sister attempts to escape through reading and daydreaming, but unlike Alice, who plunges down the rabbit-hole in pursuit, her sister falls into a female trap, accepting what's in front of her and not fully understanding the agency and opportunity within herself. "[S]he 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."[28] Her sister dreams, but she is stuck enduring a reality that Alice, we hope, will not accept. By rejecting daisy chains and following white rabbits, assertive Alice already sees the possibility in the real world she occupies. Alice offers another world for young women, one that need not be dull. Hers is a reality where women author their own tales, work out their own problems, expect the extraordinary, and speak their minds. Faced with continuing mistreatment and stereotypical expectations, today's young women do well to ask themselves, what would Alice do?

NOTES

1. Judith Little talks about feminist Alice and other literary heroines in "Liberated Alice: Dodgson's Female Hero as Domestic Rebel," *Women's Studies* 3 (1976): 195–205.
2. Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Martin Gardner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 12. All subsequent references to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* come from this text.
3. Ibid., 13.
4. Ibid., 16.
5. Ibid., 111–112.
6. Ibid., 11.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 59–60.
9. Ibid., 54–56.
10. Ibid., 62.
11. Casey Anthony is the mother accused of the murder of her two-year-old daughter, Caylee.
12. Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, 63.
13. Ibid., 84.

14. Ibid., 63.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 63–64.
17. Ibid., 69.
18. Ibid., 77.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 80.
22. Ibid., 90.
23. Ibid., 91.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 93.
26. Ibid., 120.
27. Ibid., 124.
28. Ibid., 126.