

Queen's Gambit: Sacrifice and Risk in Alice's Coronation in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*

As I watched the hit Netflix series, *The Queen's Gambit* (2020), I found it impossible not to think of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* and to see his dazzling chess board metaphors in a new light. In the tv series, eight-year-old Beth Harmon discovers the world of chess and begins her tumultuous journey to become "queen of the game." Acute, but not cute, she sets out to navigate her ascent from pawn to White Queen. Veering between madness and intense logicity, Beth's quest for queenship, against a backdrop of recurrent mirrors, has many similarities with Alice's experience. *Gambit's* heroine endures tests, threats, arguments, and discrimination before becoming a White Queen. Her boldness and resilience echo those of Alice's and are symbolized by the chess move known as the Queen's Gambit. This is a chess opening strategy, first mentioned in 1490, which entails the sacrifice of a white pawn to gain positional advantage for the queen at the centre of the board. It is an attacking move and one that encapsulates Beth and Alice's resolute ambition. But as a white pawn who longs to be a queen — "I should *like* to be a Queen, best" — when Alice attempts this transformational move, she sacrifices her innocence and risks an irreversible fall from childhood grace (141; ch.2).¹ Beth's strategic chutzpah thus made me reconsider the limits of Alice's audacity.

Becoming a queen of the chessboard enriches Beth, whose future looks progressive and reformist; she beats her male competitors, and her addictions, and changes the outlook for female chess masters. Alice's coronation, however, unsurprisingly for the nineteenth century, suggests regression and degeneration. Throughout *TTLG*, female power breeds chaos and disappoints Alice. Some critics have interpreted Alice's angry and abrupt ending of the dinner party as a positive example of female power, but Terry Otten argues compellingly that

when Alice whips away the tablecloth she is “not so much resolving the chaos as participating in it (Otten 59).”² Alice is complicit in presenting female majesty as misrule.

Beth’s rise to the top is also not without disorder; her frequent setbacks and surreal states of mind are emphasized by the use of tilted camera shots known as the “Dutch angle,” especially when she suffers a loss.³ She breaks the mould, however, for what a chess Grand Master/ “Queen” looks like, whereas Alice is offered two hopelessly inadequate queenly role models in the Red and the White Queens. Ultimately, she rejects them both. Instead of noble authority, these two females are regressive figures. As an inverse of maturation, they represent a sort of degeneration from childhood into a dysfunctional adult female state; the Red Queen embodies an atavistic Amazonian threat, while the White Queen is, in Carroll’s words, “gentle, stupid, fat and pale; helpless as an infant; and with a slow, maundering, bewildered air about her just suggesting imbecility.”⁴

The rhetoric of atavism – an evolutionary throwback to primitivism — and degeneration is more usually seen within a fin-de-siècle context. Carroll’s narrative and Tenniel’s illustrations, however, seem to suggest these notions in the figures of the two Queens. The Red Queen’s unpredictable temper and her “nine spikes,” her physical prowess and domination of the Red King, together with her racialized physiognomic profile, hints at an Amazonian matriarch — she who must be obeyed (138; ch.2).⁵ She is not a cannibal queen but one who can be savage when she wants to be. In Victorian anthropological discourse and popular imagination, a projecting jaw — prognathism — was interpreted as a sign of aggression and collectively of a “savage” race.⁶ This racist stereotype is evident in an illustration for chapter nine, where the Red Queen is depicted squatting next to Alice with headwear not unlike an African head wrap. The White Queen’s physiognomy, on the other hand, embodies physical and mental degeneration rather than atavistic features.

Despite the White Queen's aged looks, she has a baby, her "precious lily," yet she appears not only to have resigned herself to events but also to be in a state of pathological infantilism herself (128; ch.1). Her rumpled appearance evokes Hugh Welsh Diamond's iconic 1850s' photographs of asylum women, where their bewildered expressions with shawls and hair in disarray were indicative of mental degeneration.⁷ The White Queen's slack jaw reinforces her characterization as weak, while her snub nose is a "sign of low development" promising "little in the way of achievement."⁸ When the Red Queen discloses to Alice that the White Queen "never was really well brought up," it hints at contemporary associations of degeneracy originating in the "lower" classes.⁹ Overwhelmed by domestic turmoil the White Queen disappears into the soup tureen — literally "in the soup" — while a leg of mutton with a little white paper crown on top takes her chair. That she is replaced by the metaphor of mutton is significant, as aged lamb was a persistent Victorian trope representing a woman past her sexual prime. This scene concludes a harsh timeline of the White Queen's existence: from white kitten, another sexualised female metaphor, to old meat. Alice, then, is presented, with models of an Amazonian matriarch and a domesticated dolt.

In the final scenes of *The Queen's Gambit*, Beth plays chess with the locals, wearing a white crown-shaped hat topped with a bauble — there is no suggestion of mutton in her headwear but, instead, an ingenious interpretation of her social, professional, and psychological transformation. For Alice however, there is no hope of success in pursuit of the queen's gambit; the risks to her childhood self are unavoidable and becoming Queen seems to provide no positional advantages. Unlike Beth's experience of chess, the promise of power is delusional. When Alice fails to understand the rules, she refers to her childhood logic for help but finds it inadequate: "Alice sighed and gave it up. 'It's exactly like a riddle with no answer!' she thought (224; ch.9)." Her postlapsarian nostalgia simply causes more of a

muddle. When Beth revisits her experience of childhood, however, she is enlightened. On returning to the basement of the orphanage, where she learned to play chess with the janitor, she finds a wall of clippings that chart her success. Interestingly, among them is a clipping of the starting chess position from *TTLG*, which states “White pawn (Alice) to play, and win in eleven moves (113).” Seeing a visual record of her chess games clarifies for Beth the enormity of her success and the significance of her journey. Alice’s timeline, however, can be expressed in a line from the poem at the end of *TTLG*, “Autumn frosts have slain July”, where the inevitable harshness of maturity erodes the warmth of childhood (241; ch.12).

Despite the fascinating connections between the two stories, in *TTLG* Carroll fragments female maturity into atavistic and degenerative figures, thus denying Alice any joy in reaching her queenly destiny; Alice’s queen’s gambit proves a terrible disappointment.

Notes

¹ Lewis Carroll. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. Edited by Hugh Haughton. London: Penguin, 1998.

² Critics who argue for a feminist reading include Kristina Aikens. “How Wanderer Alice Became Warrior Alice and Why.” *Bitch Magazine: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, vol. 48, 2010, pp. 26-31; Judith Little. “Liberated Alice: Dodgson’s Female Hero as Domestic Rebel.” *Women’s Studies*, vol. 3.2, 1976, pp. 195-205; and Megan. S. Lloyd. “Unruly Alice: A Feminist View of Some Adventures in Wonderland.” *Alice in Wonderland and Philosophy*, edited by, Richard Brian Davis. Wile, 2010, pp. 7-18.

³ The technique was actually invented by German expressionists; see <https://massive.io/the-dutch-angle-a-cinematic-technique-that-makes-viewers-anxious/> [accessed 04.20.2021]

⁴ From Lewis Carroll. “Alice’ on the Stage:” in *The Theatre*. Edited by Clement Scott. Carson and Comerford, 1887.

⁵ Her profile compares with those in various Tenniel cartoons for *Punch* which imply that Irish and/or foreigners present a danger to the British Empire. See Mary Cowling. *The Artist as Anthropologist*. Cambridge UP, 1989, on Tenniel’s cartoons and physiognomic implications.

⁶ See Cowling, pp. 59-60.

⁷ Carroll visited displays of Diamond’s work before meeting the man himself. See Franziska E. Kohlt’s *Alice in Wonderland*, “‘The Stupidest Tea-Party in All My Life:’ Lewis Carroll and Victorian Psychiatric Practice.” *Journal of Victorian Culture*, vol. 21, No. 2, 2016, pp. 147–167.

⁸ See Cowling on the significance to physiognomy, anthropology, and art of what was termed “nasology”, pp. 145-150, p. 149.

⁹ See Sharrona Pearl. *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Harvard UP, 2010.