

Wonderland Awards

April 1, 2022

### Alice and Persephone: Trapped in Youth and Male Clutches

The fantastical and ridiculous nature of Lewis Carroll's 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,' with all of its zaniness and outlandish attributes, can seem like nothing ever presented before. While of course it exists as an unparalleled work in Victorian canon, it draws upon immense and unmistakable references. One glaring influence lies with the ties between Alice, the main character, and the ancient Greek myth of Persephone. A number of scholars have already linked these two fables or stories together, but with no unanimous consensus as to the purpose or reasoning behind this deliberate borrowing from the well-known myth. In any case, Lewis Carroll positioned Alice as Persephone as a way of clandestinely portraying the author's fascination with Alice's real-life counterpart in a realm of epic proportions, immortalizing a relationship between a child and a loving author through a renowned if not controversial love story.

Persephone's myth among interpretations typically follows the same pattern. Persephone, daughter of Olympian goddess Demeter, is frolicking through a field of flowers with a few companions, when suddenly, Hades, Greek god of the Underworld (a mythic equivalent to Hell or the destination of souls after death), emerges from the depths of below and snatches her away in his flaming chariot, pulling her down a hole into the earth.<sup>1</sup> As Demeter wails and searches the entire globe for her lost daughter, Persephone confronts her own trials and tribulations within the

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<sup>1</sup> "Persephone." *Persephone: Greek Goddess of Spring, Queen of the Underworld*, Theoi, <https://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/Persephone.html>.

supernatural realm of the dead. As it is discovered that she has been kidnapped and taken below earth's surface, she cannot fully be rescued, as she was tricked by her eventual-betrothed, Hades, to eat six pomegranate seeds from within his garden.<sup>2</sup> As myth has it, anyone who consumes anything grown within the Underworld is condemned to spend eternity there (unless, of course, your parents are Olympian gods who manage to maneuver around the eternity part, lessening your sentence to spending anywhere from four to six months with the dead. This is Persephone's case.) In the end of most reiterations of this myth, Persephone is promoted to Queen of the Underworld, ruling at Hades' side for one portion of the year. She also is simultaneously declared goddess of spring, as every time she comes back up to earth she brings nature to life and sets everything in bloom (a mythical and foolproof explanation into the changing of seasons).

Already, it might seem fairly facile to connect the dots as to where Alice's story aligns with this lore. To point out the obvious, both girls literally fall down a hole that transports them into a completely foreign world. In this foreign world, both Alice and Persephone are presented with unknown customs and are expected to learn of particular royal practices (whether it be to revere them or prepare for them). Further, both are tricked or deluded into eating the delicacies their new worlds have to offer (in Alice's case, this refers to the tiny cake with the literal cue of "EAT ME" inscribed onto it)<sup>3</sup>. Beyond simple borrowings of plot, Carroll adds other rather miniscule details to solidify this connection between the two girls. The White Rabbit acts as a guide to Alice, leading her on her path and can loosely be interpreted as a neutral companion on her journey through Wonderland. Coincidentally (but most likely not), Persephone is frequently

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<sup>2</sup> Richardson, N J. *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Clarendon Press, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. Penguin Classics, 1865.

seen with a rabbit amongst her<sup>4</sup>, as a psychopomp-like accomplice or just symbolic company due to the ties between rabbits and spring (Persephone's designated season).

Persephone's myth was a frequent inspiration in Victorian England, and Carroll's work was no exception. Numerous paintings highlighted the light and innocence of Persephone. *Demeter Mourning for Persephone*<sup>5</sup>, for one, visualizes the despair one feels when Persephone is absent from their life. Frederic Leighton's *The Return of Persephone*<sup>6</sup> can easily draw comparisons with the rabbit hole Alice finds herself stumbling down in the beginning of the text. In short, Persephone and Hade's 'romance' was a trend that Carroll furthered and capitalized off of, in his own, cryptic way.

As these are only some of the similarities between Alice and Persephone that have been noted throughout the exploration of the two stories placed side by side, it's rather transparent that there was an intentional decision on Carroll's part to model the adventures of Alice after Persephone and her voyage. However, what is truly puzzling (not unlike the vast majority of Carroll's work) is why this choice was made. What is the purpose in relating a young girl to a myth that is, in some topics of discourse, synonymous with rape and abuse, and in others, labeled as an epic of love and lust?

It is important to address Lewis Carroll's life outside of this particular novel. Charles Dodgson (Carroll's actual name) nurtured a friendship between himself and the Liddell family

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<sup>4</sup> LaVoie, Laura M. "Myth of Persephone." *Neokoroi*, He Epistole, 2003, <http://www.neokoroi.org/religion/gods/persephone/childrens-myth-of-persephone/>.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan, Evelyn De. *Demeter Mourning For Persephone*. 1906, De Morgan Centre, London.

<sup>6</sup> Leighton, Frederic. *The Return of Persephone*. 1890, The Met, New York, New York.

through the Christ Church at Oxford in the latter half of the nineteenth century<sup>7</sup>. The Liddell family consisted of Doug and Lorina Liddell, along with their four children, Lorina, Alice, Edith, and Harry. The children were with whom Carroll developed a more intimate connection, taking them out to lunch or boating on the Thames River rather often.<sup>8</sup> Alice, in particular, was the subject of many letters and writings from Carroll, as well as photographs. It was during this time that the polymath delved into a controversial form of photography of children's portraiture, of which Alice Liddell was the subject of a handful of times. The controversial aspect of these photos and portraits were the rare but undeniable instance of these children being nude at times. This notion is heavily debated between acceptable hobbies and interests in the Victorian Age and pedophilia itself. Of course, Alice was never one of these more lewd subjects, but that does not change the photographer's intentions, whatever they might be.<sup>9</sup> The extent to which Carroll had feelings for Alice and, moreover, what those feelings may have manifested into throughout their acquaintance, is not the subject of this paper, however. It is fruitless to speculate upon a more than century-old relationship that would of course today be deemed inappropriate. However, the constant and routine concern following Carroll's fascination with Liddell is worth mentioning when discussing his intentions in utilizing mythical references to craft his Wonderland.

It's been argued that Carroll positions Alice as Persephone and Alice's father, Doug Liddell, as Hades. In this iteration, Alice's father snatches away the one beacon of happiness in

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<sup>7</sup> Amor, Anne Clark. *Lewis Carroll, a Biography*. Schocken Books, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Brabant, Joseph A. *Lewis Carroll and Alice Liddell*. Poole Hall Press, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> Wakely-Mulroney, Katherine. "The Man Who Loved Children: Lewis Carroll Studies' Evidence Problem." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 335–362., <https://doi.org/10.7560/jhs30301>.

Carroll's life, as Hades snatches the springtime and flowers from the Earth when he hosts Persephone every year<sup>10</sup>. However, there exists a more deliberate call on modeling an entire story dedicated to Alice Liddell after a highly romanticized myth like Persephone's. Indeed, the core elements of Persephone herself and her decisions are aligned with Alice's path, yet the Hades figure and the Underworld itself are more positive aspects to look at in Carroll's own interpretations.

While modern popular culture recognizes the God of Hell as a thoroughly evil ruler with a thirst for chaos and violence (i.e. Disney's "Hercules"<sup>11</sup> and Rick Riordan's "Percy Jackson" series<sup>12</sup>), Ancient Greece portrayed him almost as a neutral and melancholy overseer of the fields of the underworld. Classicist and mythological novelist Madeline Miller points out that in ancient myths, while he was responsible for looking after dead souls, he was never portrayed as malicious or cruel. In fact, regarding Persephone's story, he asked for her father, Zeus's, permission to marry Persephone before acting on his lust.<sup>13</sup>

So, this link between a god who was involuntarily placed in a less-than-satisfactory position and an author who also was in a regrettable position of being inappropriately older than that of his object of beauty can be drawn instantaneously. Hades draws Persephone down a hole, to his domain of the Underworld, where he rules all and lets her reign as queen. Carroll crafts his

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<sup>10</sup> Day, David. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland Decoded: The Full Text of Lewis Carroll's Novel with Its Many Hidden Meanings Revealed*. Doubleday Canada, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Clements, Ron, director. *Hercules*, Walt Disney, 1997, disneyplus.com.

<sup>12</sup> Riordan, Rick. *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Complete Series*. Disney/Hyperion Books, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Miller, Madeline. "Persephone." *Madeline Miller*, Madeline Miller, 2017, <http://madelinemiller.com/myth-of-the-week-persephone/>.

domain of Wonderland, where everything is created solely for Alice to relish in. Both Persephone and Alice are rather helpless in their journeys, as they cannot bend the will of the worlds they have quite literally fallen into. Nor can they ward off the looming figures before them, whether it be Hades, the Duchess, the Queen of Hearts, or Lewis Carroll himself. Most variations of the myth posit Persephone around sixteen years old.<sup>1</sup> Alice Liddell was thirteen when the novel inspired by her was written by a man two decades her senior.<sup>9</sup> Both heroines are still young girls in their respective fables. Both have an older man increasingly interested or attracted to them, leading and luring both away from their parents (or, in the novel, sister).

Wonderland and all of the Carrollian elements that concoct such a fantastical place have constantly been examined, reexamined, and then examined once more for their clues, real world counterparts, inspirations, and meanings. As Lewis Carroll's letters and hobbies have pointed out as historians, scholars, and "Alice" fans take a deep dive through the author's life, the connection between Carroll and young Liddell was a driving force in this project and the subsequent world-making along with it. As it is obvious enough that Alice Liddell is of course meant to be the titular Alice, and this novel is, in many ways, a love letter to a fruitless or nonexistent romance<sup>8</sup>, we cannot put it past Carroll to remain at this level of cryptic. No, there is more to this plot than the charade and distraction of pools of tears, playing cards, and disembodied cats.<sup>3</sup> Carroll crafted this novel to entertain his young friend (and eventually millions of children), but also to illustrate his admiration for her, through layers upon layers of mythology, fantasy, and simultaneous nonsense.

Carroll finds himself relating to the classical version of Hades, something a polymath like himself would be familiar with. The rendition of a solemn figure who is neither evil nor righteous, and, in the case of abducting his sweetheart, is polite. Hades reaches out and pulls

Persephone into his Underworld, a place totally foreign to the fields she frolicked in a moment ago. Here, he offers her the world as he knows it, letting her cherish his gardens and food, and eventually offering her a throne to rule as his queen. Carroll pulls Liddell into his imaginary world of Wonderland, showing her elements and characters that could delight any child's mind and allow them to lose themselves in the joy of the story and the atmosphere the story creates. Instead of proffering the young child a throne as seen in the myth, he gifts her the immortalization of being a children's storybook hero, forever young, just as Persephone remains the youthful beauty at the King of Death's side.

Persephone and Alice therefore can never escape the youth that won the hearts of Hades and Carroll. Deified whether in myth or print, these girls will never truly grow up. What's more, they will never break free from their ties to the Olympian god or the esteemed author. Therein lies a permanent connection between each pair that neither Persephone nor Alice can ever shrug off or move away from. This could be Carroll's intention all along, to quietly elevate his and Alice's story to mythic status, allowing their short-lived relations to live on in infamy, just as the mythic love story the novel imitates has done.

Obviously there are dozens of other references and real-world counterparts (besides the flurry of original and unprecedented content flying off of each page) that make up the entirety of Wonderland and every figure within it. While Persephone's influence is a small feature in the background of this dreamscape, it cannot be avoided or ignored once recognized. Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" is a feat in the genres of fantasy and nonsense, full of meticulous detail and paragons of humor, riddles, and storytelling. Nonetheless, the Persephone-Alice connection is unmistakable. Alice Liddell (as Alice) and Persephone will forever be tied to the men that yearned for them, nondescript without these male-driven paths. Thankfully, the two

are recognized as heroines in their own right, no matter how much energy Carroll put forward to outline his admiration for his spring, his Alice, in his masterpiece that is Wonderland.