

The Lion and the Unicorn

Alice encounters the lion and the unicorn fighting in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* in a manner reminiscent of the conflicts between Eleanor and Henry.

Alice



Alice, the Lion and the Unicorn. John Tenniel (1870).

Alice encounters the lion and the unicorn fighting in *Through the Looking-Glass*, in an entangled and self-contradictory manner that is reminiscent of the conflicts among Eleanor, Henry II and Louis VII. Tenniel's illustration evokes the political battles between Gladstone and Disraeli, both known to Carroll through their Oxford connections (Gladstone as an MP for Oxford until 1865, satirized in Carroll's political pamphlet, *On the Dynamics of a Parti-cle*, and Disraeli as a friend of the Liddells). They may also have been lampooned as the expansive Walrus and the lugubrious Carpenter in the *Walrus and the Carpenter* poem.

The exchange with the Unicorn is one of many encounters questioning Alice's identity.

The Lion and the Unicorn

The Lion and the Unicorn may be symbols of the marriage of Henry II and Eleanor, since they appear in the 'Lady with the Unicorn' tapestries that were inspired by the crusaders camps.

Eleanor



Mediaeval tapestry of the 'Lady and the Unicorn' (late 15th century).

In relation to mediaeval times, the lion and the unicorn can be interpreted as symbols of the struggles surrounding Eleanor of Aquitaine, since they appear prominently in the 'Lady with the Unicorn' tapestries now in the Cluny Museum, Paris, which were inspired by the mediaeval era of chivalry (although they date to late 15th century France). Indeed, the lion was the symbol of Henry II, who was the first English monarch to have a coat of arms, and it was based on the Lion of Aquitaine that Henry inherited through his wife Eleanor from Duke William X of Aquitaine.

As one of the symbols of the chastity of Christ, the unicorn can be identified with the French monarchy, and particularly with its most pious kings such as Louis VII, who considered themselves to be directly descended from

“ The Unicorn looked dreamily at Alice, and said, ‘Child.’

Alice could not help her lips curling up into a smile as she began: ‘Do you know, I always thought Unicorns were fabulous monsters, too! I never saw one alive before!’

‘Well, now that we have seen each other’ said the Unicorn, ‘if you’ll believe in me, I’ll believe in you . . .’ ”

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 7.

Alice

The Lion and the Unicorn in the coat of arms visible prominently over the doorway to Brasenose College on Oxford High Street probably date from 1860, when Queen Victoria’s eldest son, Edward, Prince of Wales, boarded there while attending Christ Church college. The inclusion of the Unicorn in the Royal Arms dates to the unification of England and Scotland by the accession of James I in 1603. Its identification as a symbol of Scotland may derive from the descent of the Scottish kings from the French royal family through successive intermarriages, notably Mary Queen of Scots, whose coat of arms included the unicorn, who was brought up in France and was also briefly Queen of France.



Lion and Unicorn emblem prominently visible on Oxford High Street (~1860).

the biblical Jesus. Thus we may see the ‘Lady with the Unicorn’ tapestry as symbolizing the struggle between Henry II (Normandy and England) and Louis VII (France) for the allegiance of Eleanor (Aquitaine) and the treasure of the Knights Templars, represented by Alice of the Vexin (the territory of which the capital, Gisors, was a Templar stronghold and the traditional negotiation venue for the two kingdoms).

The Cluny unicorn tapestries were widely popularized in 1841 by French literary antagonists Prosper Mérimée and George Sand. Prosper Mérimée was a romantic author, writer of the opera *Carmen* and the French Inspector-General for Historical Monuments at the time. George Sand was the pen-name of the writer Amantine Dupin, famous for her subsequent liaison with Frédéric Chopin. The tapestries were discovered when the pair were staying in Boussac castle in the Loire Valley, not far from Poitiers, rolled up in a dusty pile in the corner of one of the bedrooms.

The image of Eleanor and the other wives in the tents of the crusaders’ encampments during the Second Crusade, on which she accompanied her husband Louis VII on their expedition through Turkey, may well have inspired the imagery of the tapestries, which are depicted in the style of the Persian/Byzantine miniatures that she is likely to have encountered during their passage through the Levant. On this interpretation, in the tapestry illustrated the red-haired queen would represent Eleanor of Aquitaine with Princess Alice having the role of the attendant handing her the jewelry box.



‘The Night Ride.’ Persian miniature of a king beset by harpies (~1315).

Eleanor