

The Mirror Theme

The mirror forms a dominant theme of the second book, taking the role of the rabbit hole as the entry into the imaginary dimension and inspiring the mirror-image motifs of the story.

Alice



Alice entering the Looking-Glass World. John Tenniel (1870).

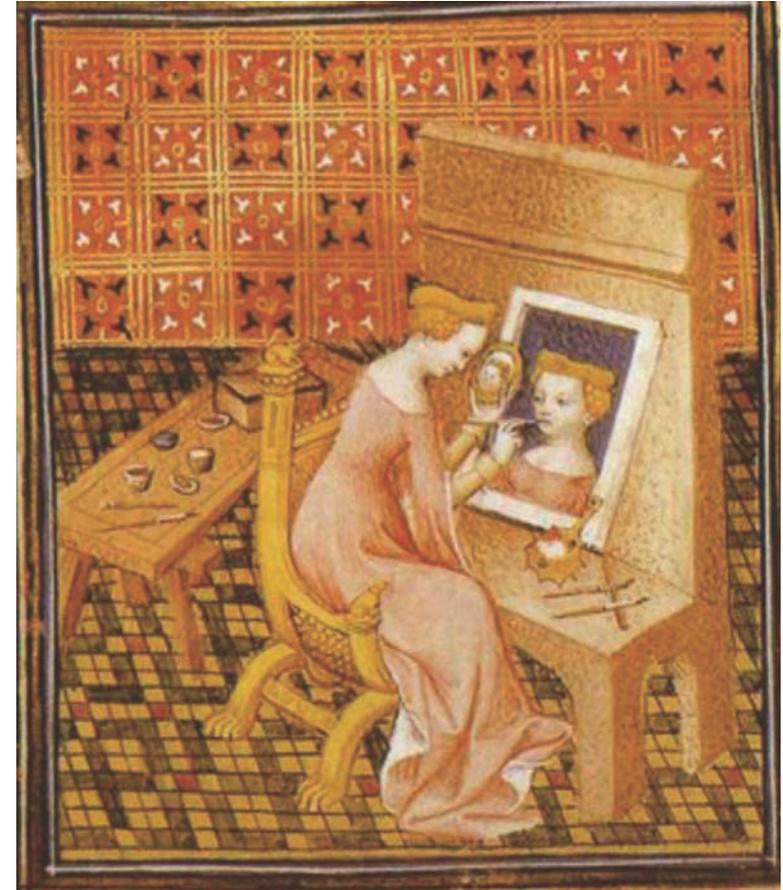
A little remarked mirroring in the genesis of the second book is that it was apparently crystallized in 1868 by a meeting with an eight-year-old cousin of Carroll's who was also named Alice, with whom he had explored the perplexing issue of which aspects of the body are (and are not) reversed in a mirror reflection. Her account is as follows:

“The idea of going through the looking-glass into a mysterious country beyond seems to have derived, however, from a meeting between Dodgson and another Alice, his little cousin Alice Raikes.

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Mirrors were greatly valued in the 12th century and are featured in the 'Mirror, mirror on the wall' legend of the rivalry between an old queen and a young princess.

Eleanor



Mediaeval lady using a mirror to paint her self-portrait (15th century).

Mirrors became a significant conceptual theme in the 12th century, as in the *Speculum Fidei* (Mirror of Faith), a religious commentary written by Robert of Cricklade, prior of St Frideswide's, Oxford, perhaps for Henry and Eleanor, and the *Speculum Anime* (Mirror of the Soul) composed in

‘So you are another Alice,’ he said. ‘I’m very fond of Alices. Would you like to come and see something which is rather puzzling? He led her into a room with a tall mirror in one corner, gave her an orange and asked her in which hand she was holding it. When she said ‘The right’, he invited her to stand before a mirror and tell him in which hand the girl in the looking-glass held the orange. ‘The left hand’, came the puzzled reply. ‘Exactly’, agreed Dodgson, ‘and how do you explain that?’ ‘If I was on the other side of the glass’, said Alice Raikes, ‘wouldn’t the orange still be in my right hand?’ ‘Well done, little Alice’, replied Dodgson, ‘the best answer I’ve had yet.’

...

I heard no more then, but in after years was told that he said that had given him his first idea for *Through the Looking-Glass*, a copy of which, together with each of his other books, he regularly sent me.”

quoted in Derek Hudson (1976) Lewis Carroll: An Illustrated Biography, Chapter 4.

Alice Raikes’ story about the orange and the looking-glass was related in a letter she wrote to *The Times*, 15 January 1932, p. 4. She married barrister William Wilson Fox and became a children’s author under the name Alice Wilson Fox. One of her books *Hearts and Coronets*, was reminiscent of the Alice stories, being about an orphaned young girl who was stranded with a noble family and then discovered through the crest on her signet ring that she was actually the countess and heir to the estate that the family had purportedly inherited in the absence of an identifiable heir.

the next century for Queen Blanche of France. Historically, mirrors are not specifically associated with either Princess Alice or Queen Eleanor, but the strongest folkloric association with mirrors is the legend of Snow White, the beautiful daughter of the aging queen who needs to view her reflection every day and ask “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?”. The mirror always confirmed that it was the queen, but when Snow White reaches the age of seven, the answer becomes “Snow White is a thousand times more fair than you”, at which the queen schemes to banish her from the earth. The story subsequently goes through various twists and turns, including an episode in which the queen tracks down Snow White and induces her to eat a poisoned apple that puts her into a comatose sleep, from which her prince ultimately awakens her.

In the present context, it becomes obvious that there are strong parallels between this story and the history of Queen Eleanor, who was known for her vanity, and Henry’s mistress, the Fair Rosamund, whom she reputedly tracked down through a hall of mirrors and killed off with a poisoned apple (Higden, 1342). This recorded episode may indeed have been the historical basis for the folk tale. It is also noteworthy that, in their telling of the story, the Brothers Grimm switched the heroine from being the queen’s daughter to being her stepdaughter from a subsequent marriage of the king, whose new wife died while giving birth to Snow White. Eleanor had a similar relationship to Princess Alice, her stepdaughter through her first husband, King Louis VII, whose young second wife, Constance, died while giving birth to Alice.