

The Red Queen

The Red Queen character typifies the creative insights of the *Alice* books, the image of such a high-speed world that one has to run as fast as possible just to stay in the same place.

Alice



The Red Queen. John Tenniel (1870).

As Alice experiences it:

“It succeeded beautifully. She had not been walking a minute before she found herself face to face with the Red Queen, and full in sight of the hill she had been so long aiming at.

At the next peg the Queen turned again, and this time she said, ‘Speak in French when you can’t think of the English for a thing — turn out your toes as you walk — and remember who you are!’ She did not wait for Alice to curtsy this time, but walked on quickly to the next peg, where she turned for a moment to say ‘good-bye,’ and then hurried on to the last.

The Red Queen

Many aspects of the Red Queen are reminiscent of Queen Eleanor, including her red hair, imperious manner and endless travelling to keep up with the affairs of her kingdoms.

Eleanor



Mediaeval effigy of Queen Berengaria holding an effigy of her patron saint (late 13th century).

Both Eleanor and Henry were reputed to have red hair (Weir, 2000), and had a red coat of arms, making them fitting choices for the Red King and Queen.

Another candidate for the Red Queen is Berengaria of Navarre, the travelling queen of King Richard I, whose coat of arms was a castle on

‘Well, in our country,’ said Alice, still panting a little, ‘you’d generally get to somewhere else — if you run very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.’

‘A slow sort of country!’ said the Queen. ‘Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!’ ”

Alice Through the Looking-Glass, Chapter 2.

The image of the Francophile Red Queen running hard to stay in the same place seems well-fitted to the role of Eleanor trying to keep pace with the fickleness of Henry II as the court, including Alice, followed him around in his efforts to maintain control of his multifarious kingdom.

A common identification of inspiration for the Red Queen is with the Liddell children’s governess, Miss Prickett, who evidently had the Red Queen’s didactic presence, and was called ‘Pricks’ by the children. However, although this is hinted by Carroll’s description of the Red Queen as ‘pedantic to the tenth degree, the concentrated essence of all governesses’, Miss Prickett was not known to have the frenetic whimsy of the Red Queen, and she apparently always wore black. Besides, Miss Prickett appears as herself in *Through the Looking-Glass, Ch. 3*, when Alice says “the governess would never think of excusing me for that. If she couldn’t remember my name, she’d call me ‘Miss!’ as the servants do.”

Ironically, the ocean liner on which Alice Liddell travelled to New York at age 80 was named ‘Berengaria’ after the queen who replaced the mediaeval Alice to marry King Richard I (Winchester, 2011).

a red shield. Berengaria was the only Queen of England who never set foot in the country. She was brought by Eleanor of Aquitaine from Spain across the Alps and through Italy to Brindisi to be married to Richard, who had rescinded his betrothal to Alice Capet when she allegedly had an affair (and apparently a baby) with his father, Henry II. Richard delayed the ceremony due to Lent and immediately set sail for the Holy Land. Eleanor and Berengaria followed and were shipwrecked on Cyprus, where they were captured by the local tyrant. Richard came to their rescue by conquering Cyprus and acquiesced to the marriage with Berengaria after disavowing his sins, sailing with her to Acre to continue the crusade. Richard soon set off for the conquest of Palestine and sent Berengaria back via Rome and Marseille to Poitiers, where he rejoined her in 1195 after his release from captivity. He immediately went off to war again, and when he finally died in 1199, Berengaria settled in Le Mans, one of her dower properties. She entered the conventual life and was buried in the abbey of L’Epau, where a skeleton thought to be hers was discovered during a 1960 restoration.

As ‘Alasia of France’, Alice appears in Eleanor Anne Porden’s 1822 epic poem *Cœur de Lion*. Porden depicts Alice being shipwrecked on the Third Crusade, and joining the army of Saladin to avenge herself on Richard for his rejection of her; in this tumult she fights as a female knight, re-named ‘Zorayda’. This seems to be a confabulation between Princess Alice and the adventures of Eleanor on the Second Crusade, but it could have given Carroll grist for the mill of a mediaeval fantasy based on the theme of ‘Alice’.