

The Troubadours

Lewis Carroll's White Knight is both a terminally ineffective campaigner and an inveterate inventor, in addition to his deep involvement in poetry. He is also presented as a saintly figure.

Alice



The White Knight as hapless crusader. John Tenniel (1870).

Tenniel's illustration of the White Knight is strongly reminiscent of the 17th century portrait of Duke William X as the saintly pilgrim (though wearing the crusader's chain mail). Carroll introduces this figure as an honourable but incompetent campaigner on the field of battle:

"He was dressed in tin armour, which seemed to fit him very badly, and he had a queer-shaped little deal box fastened across his shoulder,

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Eleanor's father, the Duke of Aquitaine, known as 'Saint William', followed his father in being a troubadour and is depicted on the pilgrimage on which he died in a 17th century etching.

Eleanor



'Saint William' the penitent knight in an etching by Jacques Callot (1630).

Like his father, Duke William X of Aquitaine was both a troubadour and a crusader, who died on a pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostela, Spain. His

upside-down, and with the lid hanging open. Alice looked at it with great curiosity.

'I see you're admiring my little box,' the Knight said in a friendly tone. 'It's my own invention — to keep clothes and sandwiches in. You see I carry it upside-down, so that the rain can't get in.'

...

Alice

'Have you invented a plan for keeping [your] hair from being blown off?' Alice enquired.

'Not yet,' said the Knight. 'But I've got a plan for keeping it from FALLING off.'

'I should like to hear it, very much.'

'First you take an upright stick,' said the Knight. 'Then you make your hair creep up it, like a fruit-tree. Now the reason hair falls off is because it hangs DOWN — things never fall UPWARDS, you know. It's a plan of my own invention. You may try it if you like.'

...

'You are sad,' the Knight said in an anxious tone: 'let me sing you a song to comfort you.'

'Is it very long?' Alice asked, for she had heard a good deal of poetry that day.

'It's long,' said the Knight, 'but very, VERY beautiful. Everybody that hears me sing it — either it brings the TEARS into their eyes, or else —'

Alice Through the Looking-Glass, Chapter 8.

Reference to the quixotic nature of the two Duke Williams and their legendary squabbles with their wives seems to be evident in Lewis Carroll's poem *You Are Old, Father William*:

"'You are old, Father William,' the young man said,
'And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head —
Do you think, at your age, it is right?'"

father, Duke William IX of Aquitaine, was famous as the first troubadour, who apparently single-handedly initiated the era of chivalry and the regaling of the court with songs of the love and longing of the troubadour ethos of *fine amor*. This spirit of enjoyment of life and of the central role of the woman in the life of the court also seems to characterize the dealings of his granddaughter, Duchess Eleanor of Aquitaine, who would have known him until about age 4. The term 'troubadour' derives from the Occitan word '*trovère*', or inventor, a reference to the culture of composing both the words and music of the love songs, although they were not sung by the *trovère* but by a minstrel.

Lady, I'm yours and yours will stay,
Pledged to your service, come what may.
This oath I take is full and free,
The kind of vow that will hold sure:
Of all my joys you are the first
And of them all you'll be the last,
As long as my life endures.

Song to Eleanor of Aquitaine by troubadour Bernard de Ventadour.

Eleanor



The crusader William IX, Duke of Aquitaine (13th century).

‘In my youth,’ Father William replied to his son,
 ‘I feared it might injure the brain;
 But, now that I’m perfectly sure I have none,
 Why, I do it again and again.’

...

‘You are old,’ said the youth, ‘and your jaws are too weak
 For anything tougher than suet;
 Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak —
 Pray how did you manage to do it?’

‘In my youth,’ said his father, ‘I took to the law,
 And argued each case with my wife;
 And the muscular strength, which it gave to my jaw,
 Has lasted the rest of my life.’ ”

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 5.

The scene with the White Knight is quite extended, and seems to be a kind of poetic epiphany as Alice experiences it, summing up the whole poignancy of the relationship to the bygone era of courtly life:

“Of all the strange things that Alice saw in her journey in *Through the Looking-Glass*, this was the one that she always remembered most clearly. Years afterwards she could bring the whole scene back again, as if it had been only yesterday — the mild blue eyes and kindly smile of the Knight — the setting sun gleaming through his hair, and shining on his armour in a blaze of light that quite dazzled her — the horse quietly moving about, with the reins hanging loose on his neck, cropping the grass at her feet — and the black shadows of the forest behind — all this she took in like a picture, as, with one hand shading her eyes, she leant against a tree, watching the strange pair, and listening, in a half dream, to the melancholy music of the song.”

Alice Through the Looking-Glass, Chapter 8.

Duke William IX was famous for the battles with his wife, for which he was excommunicated by the Pope when he took as a mistress a married duchess named Dangereuse (whose own daughter, Aenor, later married Duke William X and became Eleanor’s mother). He was also famous for his ineffectual campaigning as a crusader in Turkey, when he was frequently ambushed and defeated. He was thus the original model of the bumbling knight or ‘knight errant’, with an appropriate double entendre on the second word in the phrase in his particular case. Duke William joined the Crusade of 1101 (an expedition inspired by the success of the First Crusade in 1099) at the urging of Pope Urban II, who had spent Christmas 1095 as a guest at his court, but Duke William instead organized an expedition to capture the territories of the Counts of Toulouse in 1098 on the basis of his marriage to Philippa of Toulouse. When Pope Urban threatened them with excommunication, he acquiesced to joining the Crusade, but in September 1101 reputedly lost his entire army to the Seljuk Turks at Heraclea (see de St-Ferriol, 2005-8); William himself barely escaped and, according to the chronicler Orderic Vitalis, he reached Antioch with only six surviving companions.



Mediaeval troubadours entertaining at a court (15th century).