

## Fernando J. Soto

Independent scholar, Trail, Canada  
ferjsoto42@yahoo.com

# The Mouse's Long and Sad Tale: Lewis Carroll's Tricky Use of Aeschylus and Other Greek Sources

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In this paper I set out to provide a close reading of Carroll's "The Mouse's Tale" with special focus on parts of the Greek mythologico-dramatic tradition. I argue that Carroll's poem about a trial involving Fury and a Mouse can be traced to two ancient counterparts who partook in the most famous trial in the Greek mythological tradition: the Furies and Apollo.

**Keywords:** Furies, Apollo, Orestes, Smintheus, Mouse, youth vs. age, patriarchy vs. matriarchy, Aeschylus, Homer

*He [Carroll] seems to have derived an almost sensual satisfaction from setting a problem to which he alone knew the correct solution. The desire to perplex never left him.*

(Bakewell 1996: 43)

In this paper I attempt to give a close reading of one of Lewis Carroll's famous poems from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865): "The Mouse's Tale", because this poem, along with much of the text of the book in which it is placed, is often labelled as mere "nonsense". For instance, Richard Kelly interprets the "The Mouse's Tale" as "another instance of language as play", and in reference to it and to its chapter claims that "The strategy of *Wonderland* is to defeat different systems of logic, to keep details from culminating into some meaningful order.

The language, characters, and scenes in *Wonderland* are all essentially discrete. Attempts to fuse them lead to misunderstanding”<sup>1</sup> (2011: 23). I aim to show that it, however, has deeper meanings. I will introduce first an often overlooked or ignored facet of Carroll’s tricky personality, something which has contributed to a misunderstanding of much of the overly meaningful nature of his works. Therefore, to make room for a non-nonsensical (a more rational?) reading of “The Mouse’s Tale”, I will first provide an example of Carroll’s playful methodology in his use of language: an instance of his creative use of Greek (found in Liddell and Scott’s 1819 *Greek-English Lexicon* (1983)) to frame a puzzling linguistic joke – one similar to what I go on to argue he does in parts of the poem under question. After providing this somewhat paradigmatic example, I proceed to apply a similar method of study to “The Mouse’s Tale”.

### Introduction to Carroll’s tricks/trix

It is helpful to attempt to examine how Carroll “is able to manipulate the nonsense element in his work with mathematical precision” (Bakewell 1996: 83), or how individual components of his nonsense become “a simple idea pursued with ruthless comic literalness to its very end” (Carpenter 1985: 45). A method Carroll uses to formulate a variety of his “nonsense” relies on a form of tautology applied to ordinary language. To put it simply, Carroll seems to assume that if  $A = B$ , and  $B = C$ , and  $C = D$ , then all of these letters – here used to stand for words, roots, and any of their meanings – are equal to each other, and can be used in place of one another at any one time. To begin to present what can be very complex Carrollian wordplay, I will provide the following preliminary example from the author’s life.

Morton Cohen identifies an event that is significant for an understanding of Carroll’s playful use of names, meanings, and his creative comprehension and utilisation of some obscure parts of language. In *The Letters of Lewis Carroll* (in Carroll 1978) and in *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (Cohen 1995), Cohen draws attention to the first meeting between Carroll and one of his young women friends, Lottie Rix.<sup>2</sup> This is how the excited Lottie related the curious event to her mother, in a letter included in *The Letters of Lewis Carroll* (Carroll 1978: 578, emphasis in the original):

<sup>1</sup> He does mention, however, that “there is a faint foreshadowing of the trial at the end of the book. Both satirize the legal system by presenting a Kafkaesque vision of justice, a surreal distortion of the rules of law” (Kelly 2011: 23).

<sup>2</sup> Cohen seems to register the importance of this episode because he includes it in two of his books devoted to Carroll. The episode is only mentioned in a letter from Lottie Rix to her mother, which is one of the very few letters not written by Carroll in the two thousand or so collected by Cohen in *The Letters of Lewis Carroll* (Carroll 1978).

My dearest Mother,

Yesterday afternoon there were none of your Minchins or Robinsons for *me*! I was content with none less than

The Great *Lewis* himself!!!

I must tell you about it before I answer your letters. I went down to dinner as usual, and was stodging through my meat when the servant put into my hand a card. I turned pale and read

Rev. C. L. Dodgson

Christ Church, Oxford

I think I was as much horrified as pleased at first. I had on an old every-day blue dress and filthy apron. But I tore off that, and made myself as respectable as possible and walked with as much calmness as remained to me, to S. Louisa's room where he was. The first thing he did after shaking hands with me and asking if I was Miss Rix, was to turn me round and look at my back. I wondered what on earth he was doing, but he said that he had been made to expect a tremendous lot of hair, and that he hadn't had the *least* idea what I was like, except that he had a vague vision of *hair*. (Emphasis in the original).

In *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*, Cohen (1995) goes on to imply that the above event should be classified under Carroll's unexplainable idiosyncrasies or nonsensical humour.<sup>3</sup> There is, however, more to this strange event than meets the eye or ear.

Carroll's choice of words to a puzzled Lottie points to a pattern, or a word arrangement that tends to resemble a clue, pointing to a linguistic puzzle. If we place the two verbal objects under discussion side by side, Lottie Rix = '(a) lot of hair', we can see that both sides of this equation begin with exactly the same three letters – “l”, “o”, and “t” – or the word “lot”. What remains once these two instances of “lot” are removed from each side of the equation is “tie Rix”, and “of hair”. The next step involves a shift from the visual to the auditory: turning the “tie” (pronounced ‘tee’) into the letter “t”, and then joining it to the rest of this girl's name. This furnishes “tRix”, or the more standard “trix”. Now it is a simple matter of finding a source where “trix” means ‘of hair’. Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* helps to reveal the answer to Carroll's puzzle: “τρίχ- ἰαζ, ου, ό” – ‘one that is hairy’ (1983: 1825). This is seconded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2015), in the many definitions of words beginning with the anglicised root “Trich-”, such as “Trichophite [...] Greek τριχ-, hair [...]”. Thus, to a creative, etymologically alert Carroll – who had studied Greek, using Liddell and Scott from an early age (Sutherland 1970: 29–33; in Cohen 1995: 8), and owned more than one version of the famous *Lexicon* (Lovett 2005: 193) – “Lottie Rix” (i.e., “lot - t - rix”) is represented as meaning ‘lot (of) hair’.

<sup>3</sup> This event is placed between two others which seem to frame it as “cracked” or “mad” (cf. Cohen 1995: 311–312).

## Some background for “The Mouse’s Tale”

MY DEAR CHILDREN,

*Some of you have heard already of the old Greeks; and all of you, as you grow up, will hear more and more of them. Those of you who are boys will, perhaps, spend a great deal of time in reading Greek books; and the girls, though they may not learn Greek, will be sure to come across a great many stories taken from Greek history [...].*

(Kingsley 1856: 3)

“The Mouse’s Tale” and its *Underground* precursor, i.e. *Alice’s Adventures Underground*, finished in 1864 (Carroll 1965a), seem to be the only shape or concrete poems Lewis Carroll penned. Although short in length, both versions of the poem show signs of being extremely complex and compact pieces of literature. In a comparative study of the *Wonderland* and *Underground* poems, researchers uncovered four surprisingly well-hidden meta-linguistic puns (Maiden, Graham, and Fox 1989: 32–6). Martin Gardner alludes to a theory that the shape of “The Mouse’s Tale” is linked to the form of a similar piece of poetry about which Lord Alfred Tennyson told Carroll (1960: 50, n. 4):

Tennyson once told Carroll that he had dreamed a lengthy poem about fairies, which began with very long lines, then the lines got shorter and shorter until the poem ended in fifty or sixty lines of two syllable each [...] the opinion has been expressed [...] that this may have given Carroll the idea for his mouse’s tale.

In one of Carroll’s letters to his cousin W.E. Wilcox we find, appended to the above segment of his diaries (copied in this letter), other possible connections to Tennyson, “The Mouse’s Tale”, and Aeschylus and Homer. In this letter, written in May of 1859, Carroll reports that he paid a visit to Tennyson’s house. While there he was not allowed to view the unpublished proof sheets of *The Idylls of the King*; however, Tennyson did permit him to “[...] see what sorts of books occupied the lowest of the swinging bookshelves, most handy to his writing-table: they were all without exception Greek or Latin – Homer, Aeschylus, Horace, Lucretius, Virgil, etc.” (Carroll 1978: 36–37).

From the above we can infer how Carroll understood the importance of keeping the main Classical sources close at hand when writing works of fiction, considering he found it worthy of mentioning this fact to his cousin in a letter. Hence, while we lack a report listing the books within reach of Carroll’s own writing-table,<sup>4</sup> in this

<sup>4</sup> There are published accounts of the items in L.C.’s library (Lovett 2005), and we know of the books in Carroll’s possession just before his death, but nothing of his library at the time when he wrote *Alice*. Carroll’s books were catalogued for an auction held soon after he died, and by that time more than 33 years had elapsed since the first publication of *Alice*.

paper I suggest that he, like Tennyson, had his Aeschylus and Homer handy when he wrote “The Mouse’s Tale” in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

### Other backgrounds: Greek and “The Mouse’s Tale”

Lewis Carroll’s father (Charles Dodgson Sr.) was a first-rate classical scholar in an age of unprecedented interest in and research into ancient Greek studies.<sup>5</sup> This, along with the intense focus on Greek language and literature in the British education system during Carroll’s formative years, guaranteed that he would have read and studied one of the most celebrated writers in the Greek tradition, Aeschylus. As early as 1845, Carroll was methodically studying this playwright. This is how a part of his formal studies are chronicled by Morton Cohen (1982: 35):

Prometheus Vincetus, Vol. 1, a ten-page manuscript in a hand-made school notebook, consists of a Greek-English lexicon to the first thirty-nine lines of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*. Carroll began compiling this vocabulary aid on 21 August 1845, when he was thirteen, just after he had become a schoolboy at Richmond School, Yorkshire.

In 1853 Carroll wrote “The Ligniad”, a mock-epic poem for his friend, the Greek scholar George Woodhouse. Here Carroll quotes in the original Greek from Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (Green 1976: 83–84). Two years later, and a decade before publishing *Wonderland*, Carroll records in his diary his intentions to continue to read Aeschylus (1993: I, 73). Given that only seven of Aeschylus’ plays have endured, it is highly unlikely that Carroll would not have read and studied *Choephoroe* and *The Furies*, the other two famous dramas that follow *Agamemnon*, and which complete the only surviving Greek trilogy.

There has been little critical literary research devoted to “The Mouse’s Tale”; therefore, it is not surprising that no one has explained the meaning of the poem or the poem itself as part of the wider *Wonderland* narrative. Carroll, however, left some clues for the “deciphering” of his poem. For instance, proper names are implicit in the poem: a dog named Fury addresses a mouse, who then becomes “Mouse” for most of the story. Because of these implicit names, I will argue that Carroll’s Fury is linked to the mythological Furies, and that the poem and its placement in *Wonderland* can be understood as a playful, and very compressed, rendering of parts of Aeschylus’ *The Furies*.

<sup>5</sup> For some of the senior Dodgson’s accomplishments in the Classics, see Morton Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (1995: 324). For an introduction to the keen British interest in Greek studies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980: 1–20).

Here is the full poem in a similar shape to the one in which it appeared in Carroll's manuscript *Alice's Adventures Underground*:

We lived beneath the mat  
 Warm and snug and fat  
 But one woe, & that  
     Was the cat!  
     To our joys  
     a clog, In  
     our eyes a  
     fog, On our  
     hearts a log  
 Was the dog!  
 When the  
 cat's away,  
 Then  
 the mice  
 will  
 play,  
 But, alas!  
 one day, (So they say)  
     Came the dog and  
     cat, Hunting  
     for a  
     rat,  
     Crushed  
     the mice  
     all flat;  
 Each  
 one  
 as  
 he  
 sat.  
 Un  
 de  
 rn  
 ea  
 th  
 the  
 m  
 a  
 t,  
 Warm,  
 &  
 Snug,  
 &  
 Fat –  
 Think?  
 of that!<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For the true shape of this poem, see Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures Underground* (1965a: 28).

In *Wonderland*, Carroll kept the shape of the poem, but changed much of its content, gave the antagonist a name, Fury, and changed the point of view:

‘Fury said to  
 a mouse, That  
           he met  
                   in the  
                       house  
                       Let us  
                       both go  
                       to law:  
           I will  
 prosecute  
 you. –  
 Come, I’ll  
   take no  
   denial;  
   We must  
           have a  
                   trial:  
                       For  
                       really  
                       this  
                       morning  
                           I’ve  
                       nothing  
                       to do.’  
       Said the  
       mouse to  
       the cur,  
       ‘Such a  
       trial,  
       dear sir,  
       With no  
       jury or  
       judge,  
       would be  
       wasting  
       our breath.  
       ‘I’ll be  
       judge,  
       I’ll be  
       jury,’  
       said  
       cunning  
       old Fury:  
       ‘I’ll try  
       the whole  
       cause,  
       and  
       condemn  
       you  
       to  
       death.’<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For the true shape of this poem, see Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1876: 37).

By omitting all references to cats, the *Wonderland* poem does not explain why the Mouse hates felines as well as canines, something of some importance which the rodent had promised explicitly to disclose to Alice with his “history” in both *Underground* and *Wonderland*. Because the revised *Wonderland* version of the poem does not fit the narrative as well as the original one in *Underground*, Carroll probably had strong reasons for the drastic changes he made to the poem when he revised his book for publication.

## Beginning to unravel the Mouse's knotty tale

Some of the most frequent embodiments of the Furies in Greek mythology are as dogs and hounds. This is explicit in such classic texts as Aeschylus' *Choephoroe*, ll. 911, 1050, *The Furies*, ll. 128–132, 151, 245;<sup>8</sup> Sophocles' *Electra*, l. 1387; Euripides' *Electra*, ll. 1253, 1343, *Orestes*, l. 261, and *Bacchantes* l. 977. Karl O. Muller sums up the Fury-dog connection in his study of Aeschylus' *The Furies* (1835: 217):

This image [of hounds] is by far the most prominent in the features marked by Aeschylus, particularly in the first section of the tragedy [*The Furies*]: like hounds, the Erinnyes give tongue in their sleep, pursue the bloody track and scent, lap blood from carcasses [...]. And in the *Choephoroe* [...] as also by Sophocles and others, they are in plain terms designated by the appellation of *κυνες* [dogs/hounds], as it were a proper name.<sup>9</sup>

That Carroll's Fury should be a dog is thus well supported in the Greek mythologico-dramatic tradition. Moreover, the central myth about the Furies concerns the most famous trial in Greek mythology: that of Orestes, for the murder of his mother. The Furies unwittingly force this trial by their pursuit and hounding of Orestes, who is protected and defended by Apollo.<sup>10</sup> These parallels promise to

<sup>8</sup> *The Furies* of Aeschylus, ll. 731–732. Unless otherwise stated, quotations from this play are taken from the text published in Collard's *Aeschylus: Oresteia* (2003). Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text as *F-O*. References to this and other translations or plays will follow the line numbering in the given translation or play. It is unclear what the original title of Aeschylus' third and final play of *The Oresteia* proper was. Today this play is either called *The Eumenides* or *The Furies*. The usual name given to this play during Victorian times, however, was *The Furies*, the title I will use in this paper.

<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare seems to follow this ancient Fury/dog tradition by assigning the name of “Fury” to one of his vengeful “[s]pirits in the shape of dogs and hounds”. For this, see *The Tempest*, IV, i, 357–365, in Rowse's edition of *The Annotated Shakespeare III* (Shakespeare 1978: 900). It may be remarked that just as the ancient dramatists assign these particular dogs the proper name of “Dogs”, Carroll seems to follow suit with his transformation of his mouse to “Mouse”.

<sup>10</sup> In Euripides' *Electra*, Orestes' uncles, the Dioscuri, foretell that the Furies' constant hounding of the matricide will lead directly to the famous trial (1253–1264). For this quotation, see Hutchins' *Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes* (1952: 338), hereinafter cited as *ASEA*.



shed some light on a possible meaning of the Mouse’s story, a “history” involving a dog named Fury and a related “trial”. The best literary source in which to search the ancient canon for more of this “history” is Aeschylus’ *The Orestia*, particularly *The Furies*, where these Furies/Dogs and the famous mythical trial are put on the stage for the first time.

### Aeschylus’ Furies and Carroll’s Mouse’s trial

A major figure in Aeschylus’ *The Orestia* is Apollo, the Olympian god who commands and goads/forces Orestes to murder his mother, and then serves as his protector and advocate at the subsequent trial in *The Furies*. Aeschylus, however, presents something unexpected in his rendering of the well-known myth – he portrays a more fundamental trial running parallel to and eclipsing that of Orestes. The Greek dramatist portrays what for him is ultimately at stake in the midst of this story of matricide: a struggle between the Furies, who represent the old, Chthonic matriarchal goddesses, and Apollo, who stands in for the younger, Olympian patriarchal gods (Muller 1835: 107–108, 116). Generally speaking, it is this *agon* or theomachy between the Earth goddesses and the Olympian gods that is the point of contention for Aeschylus (Greene 1944: 129, 134).<sup>11</sup> As the ancient Furies first confront Apollo, they state part of their case against him, and against the usurping, younger Olympian gods:

Young god against old, you have ridden me down;  
and the suppliant [Orestes] has your respect, a man godless  
and harsh to his parents;  
you stole the matricide away – you, a god!  
[...]  
I myself get abuse [...]  
[...]  
Such things as these are done by younger gods  
with power wholly beyond justice. (*F-O*, ll. 150–163)

Following the Furies’ defeat at the trial, they twice complain in a similar vein:

You younger gods! The ancient laws –  
you have ridden them down! You have taken them out of  
my hands for yourselves! (*F-O*, ll. 777–779, 808–809)

Within this wider context of a theomachy, the dog-like Furies accuse Apollo directly and fully for Clytemnestra’s murder:

<sup>11</sup> For an explanation of Aeschylus’ presentation and understanding of the *agon* between Chthonic/Dark and Olympian/Light, see Fagles’ “Notes to *The Eumenides*” (1979: 317–318, n. 7).

Lord Apollo, hear me in my turn. You are yourself no mere accomplice in these things, but you have been the single agent completely, as taking the whole responsibility. (*F-O*, ll. 198–200)<sup>12</sup>

Apollo does not at first accept full responsibility (as a “single agent”) for Clytemnestra’s murder, yet, in the middle of the play, near the beginning of the trial, he does so directly:

I have come both to give evidence – for this man is legally a suppliant and refugee at my hearth, and I am his purifier from bloodshed – and to support his case myself. I am responsible for the killing of his mother. (*F-O*, ll. 576–580)<sup>13</sup>

Thus, for Aeschylus the primary struggle is between the Furies and Apollo: Orestes seems to serve merely as Apollo’s helpless pawn. According to Aeschylus, he is the young man used by Apollo to carry out the overthrow of the old laws through the murder of his mother Clytemnestra, and who then must stand in as the proxy-defendant instead of the God at the trial (Muller 1835: 110, 187).<sup>14</sup> This is particularly apparent as Apollo is accused directly of Clytemnestra’s murder, and accepts sole responsibility for this crime, and as he takes over the whole of the defence, and the Furies respond only to his arguments for the majority of the trial (*F-O*, ll. 614–730).<sup>15</sup> Therefore, if the charges brought by Aeschylus’ Furies best suit Apollo, a review of some of this god’s mythology may prove helpful at this stage.

A somewhat humorous piece of Greek mythology that Carroll probably had in mind when he created the Mouse’s long and sad tale is one of the epitaphs given to Apollo in ancient mythology: *Smintheus*. In an important passage of Book I of *The Iliad*, old Chryses, Apollo’s elder priest who has come to ransom his daughter, is

<sup>12</sup> Robert Fagles translates this passage in *Aeschylus: The Oresteia* (1979: 239) in a more legalistic manner: “Lord Apollo, now it’s your turn to listen / Thou art – I say not the abettor of this – / But the sole Doer; Thou and only Thou”.

<sup>13</sup> G.M. Cookson’s translation (in *ASEA*, 87, ll. 474–478) gives another legal meaning to the above lines: “First I am come to testify; for ye / Have here a suitor and a suppliant / Of Mine; his blood-guilt I did purge and cleanse. / Next, I am in the bill, myself arraigned / For this man’s mother’s murder”.

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of the political struggles between the older aristocracy and the younger democracy in Aeschylus’ *The Furies*, see Muller (1835: 107–108).

<sup>15</sup> Euripides has also some of his characters blame Apollo for Clytemnestra’s murder. In *Orestes*, he has the title character state the following about Apollo: “’Tis Loxias [Apollo] I blame” (ll. 288), and later “[f]ind him guilty of the crime, slay him; his was the sin, not mine” (ll. 592). In the same play, Electra states “he instigated Orestes to slay his own mother, a deed few approved; still it was his obedience to the god that made him slay her” (ll. 33). Helen, their aunt, agrees with them when she first meets Electra: “how is it with thee and thy brother, this ill-starred Orestes who slew his mother! Speak; for referring the sin as I do to Phoebus, I incur no pollution by letting thee accost me” (ll. 77). In *Electra*, the deified Dioscuri tell Orestes that at the trial “Loxias will take the blame upon himself, since it was his oracle that advised thy mother’s murder” (ll. 1264). For these quotations, see Euripides’ *Orestes* and *Electra*, in *ASEA*, 396, 400, 394, 338 respectively.

rebuked, threatened, and dismissed by the younger Agamemnon. This strong insult and rejection leads the scorned priest to pray to his powerful god:

O Smintheus, hear! If e'er my offer'd gifts  
 Found favour in thy sight; if e'er to thee  
 I burn'd the fat of bulls and choicest goats,  
 Grant me this boon – upon the Grecian host  
 Let thine unerring darts avenge my tears. (Homer ll. 48–52)<sup>16</sup>

The irreverent treatment of his priest and the prayer cited above stir Apollo's wrath: he unleashes a pestilence upon the Greeks, leading directly to the verbal clash between Agamemnon and Achilles. The crucial point for this paper, however, is that the word "Smintheus" means "Mouse" or "Mouse God" (Liddell and Scott 1983: 1620).<sup>17</sup> In a similar manner as Lottie Rix meant "lot of hair" to Carroll, he probably connects Apollo, as Smintheus, with his *Wonderland* Mouse. Thus, Alice – the *Wonderland* character based on the daughter of George Henry Liddell, co-compiler of the *Greek-English Lexicon* (1819/1983), which defines "Smintheus" as "Mouse" – uses precisely the right words whereby to address this particular Mouse when she meets him. Exactly as Chryses does in *The Illiad*, Alice begins with the English equivalent of "O Smintheus", that is, with "O Mouse" (Carroll 1876: 24). Thus, Carroll's seemingly whimsical "dog-and-mouse" story seems to have deep literary and mythical roots. The *Wonderland* characters and trial mirror those portrayed by Aeschylus. Having connected Carroll's Fury with the Furies, and his Mouse with Apollo, let us see how the narrative in *The Furies* gives additional insights toward a growing understanding of the mythologically grounded "history" in "The Mouse's Tale".

## Differing ancient conceptions of "law", "justice", and "trials"

*They [the Furies] know no pity, nor any excuse or justification for crime; they are interested only in the deed [...]*  
 (Greene 1944: 17)

Like Carroll's Fury and Mouse, the ancient Furies and Apollo disagreed about what constitutes "law", "justice", and a "fair trial". The Furies follow an ancient, rigid conception of justice, in which certain crimes, like matricide, warrant punishment at their hands, with no extenuation (Hogan 1984: 147–148). They explain some of this in *The Furies*:

<sup>16</sup> On several occasions in Book I, Homer writes that the younger Agamemnon scorned Chryses, who is a trembling "old man", and an "aged sire" (ll. 32, 41, 434, 445, and 545).

<sup>17</sup> For further connections between "Smintheus" and "mouse," see Lempriere's *Classical Dictionary* 1984: 634, and Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* 1957: sections 14.2, 21.3, 90.3, and 158.2.

The mother-blood those murderous hands have shed  
 Is irrecoverably fled!  
 The swallowing earth shall yield it nevermore!  
 Thy life for hers; thou shalt fill me a cup  
 Drawn from those veins of thine;  
 Deep draughts of jellied blood I will sip and sup,  
 Though bitter be the wine.  
 And then when I have sucked thy life-blood dry,  
 I'll drag thee down below! (*ASEA* 83–84, ll. 259–266)

This ancient “an eye for an eye” form of justice had its own rules, which the Furies perceive Leto’s son Apollo now flouting:

The faithful witness for the dead,  
 Plenipotentiary Blood  
 And Slaughter’s Sovran minister.  
 Hear me, my mother! Har  
 Night, in whose womb I lay,  
 Born to punish dead souls in the dark  
 And the living souls in the day!  
 Lo, Leto’s Lion-cub  
 My right denies;  
 He would take my slinking beast of the field,  
 Mine, mine by mother-murder sealed,  
 My lawful sacrifice. (*F-O*. ll. 318–328)

Hence, the Furies, like Carroll’s Fury, are both judge and jury rolled into one, and they unilaterally condemn those who shed kindred blood, particularly that of a close blood-relative, to death. It is this ancient conception of “law” and “justice” that Apollo and the younger Olympian gods set out to transform by instituting a new form of trial. And while Apollo was not related to Clytemnestra, Aeschylus, by placing him as the main figure tried by the Furies for her murder, connects this god to Orestes. Moreover, Muller links closely both figures in other key manners (1835: 202):

The virtue of Apollinary expiation is strikingly illustrated in the mythic tale of Orestes. The story of his residence at Delphi, whence he sets out as avenger of blood, and whither he returns in the character of Protopaeus [“Turner of Pollution”], is undoubtedly of very ancient origin. The presentation of Crisaeon Pylades as his faithful companion, and of Orestes himself as defender of the Pythian temple against Pyrrhus, indicates a close connection between the hero and the God [...].

Neither Apollo Smintheus nor Carroll’s Mouse accept the older type of justice. Apollo purifies and protects the matricidal Orestes before he sends him to Athena, who is pressured by the Furies to try Orestes and Apollo – in a trial with separate judge and jury – likely furnishing the first literary record of such modern legal

procedures. There, Orestes and Apollo are acquitted, and thus Apollo and the Olympians are vindicated.<sup>18</sup>

Near the end of Aeschylus' play, the young gods, through Athena, force the Furies to accept a modern concept of Law. The Furies sum up the new situation as they twice cry out:

Oh, ye young Gods! Ye have ridden the old  
laws down, ye have reft  
My prey, and I am left  
Dishonoured and undone! (*F-O*. ll. 791–794, 820–823)

Thus, at the end of *The Furies* Aeschylus shows the triumph of the younger Olympian gods, led by Apollo, and the suppression of the old matriarchy along with their fearsome enforcers, the chthonic dog-like Furies. Carroll, a student of the Classics, seems to follow this “history” in his *Wonderland* poem, by introducing similar characters (albeit within a “nonsense”, comic, narrative) in similar situations as their ancient predecessors.

### **Morning prosecution at the “house” and taking no “denial”**

As I have shown, the two characters in Carroll's “The Mouse's Tale” correspond well with those in segments of Greek mythology and Aeschylus' drama surrounding the famous trial. These are not, however, the only points of intersection between Carroll's poem, the Greek mythological tradition, and Aeschylus. For instance, the first encounter between Apollo and the Furies occurs in the morning, right after the dog-like monsters awaken from their deep slumber in Apollo's “house”, from which domicile they are later ejected (*F-O*, ll. 35, 60, 205, 207).<sup>19</sup> While at the god's “house”, it is still in the early morning when a Fury charges Apollo with the murder of Clytemnestra (*F-O*, ll. 198–200). This is the “same” place where Carroll's Fury confronts the Mouse: “Fury said to a mouse that he met in the house” (Carroll 1876: 37). Both events also occur at a similar time of day, as Fury makes clear – “For really this morning I've nothing to do” (*ibid.*). Hence, Carroll's Fury and Mouse mimic Aeschylus' Furies and Apollo by partaking in a discussion about

<sup>18</sup> It is probably the irreverent idea of putting Apollo directly on trial, as well as the dramatist's deep love for the Olympians, that guides Aeschylus to downplay the methods this god used in taking over the oracle of Delphi and his responsibility for Clytemnestra's murder. Aeschylus claims that Apollo was given the oracle as a birthday gift, while almost every other account of the myth involves his killing of the chthonic Python, an obvious Earth divinity connected to the Furies. For an analysis of Apollo's “murder” of the Python and this young god's subsequent pollution and punishment, see Hogan's *A Commentary on the Complete Greek Tragedies: Aeschylus* (1984: 149–150). Like Orestes, Apollo was banished and had to partake in a ritual cleansing for this crime. For the identification of Orestes with Apollo, see Muller's *Dissertations on the Eumenides of Aeschylus* (1835: 161–163).

<sup>19</sup> The original Greek stem used by Aeschylus in the above instances is *δομῶ* or “house”.

an analogous trial, at a similar place (a “house”), and at a similar time (morning), as their Greek predecessors had done.

While Aeschylus' Furies are still in Apollo's “house,” the god attempts – as does Carroll's Mouse – to persuade the dogged Furies to give up their idea of a “trial”:

APOLLO. [...] I know you are driving Orestes into exile unjustly [...] Pallas [Athena] however will watch over the pleas in this case.

CHORUS [Furies]. I will never leave this man alone!

APOLLO. In that case go on pursuing him and make yourself more work.

CHORUS. Don't try to curtail my prerogatives by what you say!

APOLLO. I wouldn't even consent to have your prerogatives.

CHORUS. [...] I will pursue this man for justice, however, because a mother's murder is drawing me on, and I will hunt him down. (*F-O*. ll. 220–231)

Apollo's attempts to dissuade the Furies from pursuing their case all the way to a “trial” seem to come to the same conclusion as Carroll's Fury implies: if Aeschylus' Furies cannot kill Orestes outright or punish Apollo at this early stage, then they will “take no denial”, they “must have a trial”. This is again apparent when the Furies convince an unwilling Athena to preside over the trial: “[p]ut the truth to the test; give a straight judgement in a trial” (*F-O*. ll. 433). Thus, Aeschylus' Furies, like Carroll's Fury, seem intent on wasting their and Apollo's “breath”, by pushing their claim all the way toward a final showdown, the famous mythological trial.

### **Old age versus youth, and male and female struggles in *Wonderland***

The points of connection between Carroll and Aeschylus are not limited to plot, setting, and the use of similar characters; they also express similar themes. As Robert Graves writes, the Erinnyes or Furies “live in Erebus, and are older than Zeus or any of the other Olympians. Their task is to hear complaints brought by mortals against the insolence of the young to the aged, of children to parents” (1957: section 31.g). Another commentator sees the developing issue as a “[c]onflict between old and new, young and old, which takes a variety of forms in [*The Furies*] [...]” (Hogan 1984: 155). Likewise, a recurring theme in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is that of aged characters attempting to assert authority over younger ones, and the young characters calling that authority into question or repudiating it altogether. This theme is a common one in several Victorian texts and movements. Elsie Leach sums up the importance of this predilection within Carroll's text: “[t]he underlying message of *Alice*, then, is a rejection of adult authority, a vindication of the rights of the child, even the right of the child to self-assertion” (1981: 125).

This age-youth conflict first appears in the chapter entitled “A Caucus Race and a Long Tale”. For instance, it is clear from the language (and myth) Carroll uses to construct “The Mouse’s Tale” that Fury is an authoritative cunning old cur assailing what seems to be a younger Mouse. In addition, this irreverent chapter includes Alice’s argument with the Lory directly on the topic of authority and age (Carroll 1876: 30):

[...] after a few minutes it seemed quite natural to Alice to find herself talking familiarly with them [the wet animals], as if she had known them all her life. Indeed she had quite a long argument with the Lory, who at last turned sulky, and would only say, “I am older than you, and must know better;” and this Alice would not allow without knowing how old it was, and as the Lory positively refused to tell its age, there was no more to be said.

Later, the now older, professorial Mouse feels slighted by the younger Lory, Duck, and Alice; finally, the insulted rodent angrily leaves the scene in a huff (Carroll 1876: 31, 38). The older Dodo is insulted by the young Eaglet, who criticises his use of long words, and questions his knowledge of their meanings (32).<sup>20</sup> The implications of the Mouse’s “history” and these additional conflicts about age, youth, and authority are not lost on two other *Wonderland* denizens, an old Crab and her daughter. The two display similar tensions, as the old Crab admonishes her daughter with: “Ah, my dear! Let this be a lesson to you never to lose *your* temper!” (emphasis in original; Carroll 1876: 39). But her daughter will have none of this. She disrespectfully replies: “Hold your tongue, Ma! [...] You are enough to try the patience of an oyster!” (ibid.).

Alice’s original disagreement with the Lory on the topic of age and authority; the Duck’s and the Eaglet’s insulting outbursts towards the Dodo; the Mouse’s chastisement of Alice, the Duck, and the Lory for not attending to his history lesson; and “The Mouse’s Tale”, all depict a power struggle between elders and youth, reflecting the *agon* between the older Furies and the younger Apollo, in which the latter, by being younger, wins. Because he is not as youthful as Apollo is in Aeschylus’ plays, Carroll’s bossy Mouse, described as a “person of some authority” (Carroll 1876: 30), is liable in his turn to have his authority questioned by the younger *Wonderland* characters. Viewed as a group, all of these characters and instances of irreverence help to make up a chapter in Carroll’s *Wonderland* that

<sup>20</sup> Most of these characters, including the Dodo, the Duck, the Lory, the Eaglet, and Alice, are modelled on persons who participated in a rowing excursion which Carroll incorporated into *Underground* and *Wonderland*. The Dodo is Charles Dodgson (Carroll), born in 1832; the Duck is Robinson Duckworth, born in 1834; the Lory is Lorina Liddell, born in 1849; the Eaglet is Edith Liddell, born in 1854; and Alice is Alice Liddell, born in 1852. For this information, refer to Gardner, *The Annotated Alice* (1960: 44, n. 7) and Jones and Gladstone’s *The Alice Companion* (1998: 66, 77, 163, 157, and 161, respectively).

may be said to mirror the age versus youth struggles between the Furies and Apollo outlined by Aeschylus, but this time in the playful context of Carrollian “nonsense”.

In Aeschylus the younger gods win their *agon* against the older Furies, instituting a precedent for all such future instances. Perhaps this “history” helps to account for Carroll’s Mouse surviving his original “trial”, allowing him to live to tell his long and sad tale in *Wonderland*, and the reason why Alice, the young Crab, the Eaglet, the Duck, and the Lory are never punished by their elders.<sup>21</sup> Aeschylus’ Furies predict such inversions of the order between age and youth as they foresee losing their case:

Catastrophe now is coming  
from new ordinances, if a justice  
which is harm to justice shall prevail  
for this man here, the matricide.  
This day’s work will at once accustom  
all men to licence;  
and much veritable suffering, which their own children  
will inflict, lies waiting for parents  
in time hereafter. (*F-O*. ll. 490–498)

Alongside the conflict between the young and their elders, Carroll stages an educational *agon* between females and males that mirrors a similar struggle in Victorian English Culture. Shanyn Fiske summarises: “[b]arred from the formal schooling in Greek and Latin that was given by rote to middle- and upper-class boys, girls in the nineteenth century had to satisfy their desire for classical knowledge through self education [...]” (2008: 4). The prejudice against girls learning Greek and Latin in the same way as boys did was beginning to be questioned by some of the more progressive Victorians during the time Carroll was writing his masterpiece, though many, such as Charles Kingsley, saw no problem in boys learning to read Greek while girls only read “stories” in translation (see the epigraph by Kingsley on p. 294). Carroll, in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, seems very aware of the masculine monopoly on Greek and Latin.<sup>22</sup> Alice may not have been formally trained in the classical languages, but she has surely transgressed the boundary between girls’ and boys’ knowledge by looking at her brother’s Latin lessons (Carroll 1876: 24–25):

<sup>21</sup> The “dry” story the Mouse narrates, like “The Mouse’s Tale”, relies on an actual historical text that also calls authority into question. In this case it is King William the Conqueror’s authority that is challenged by the rebels the Mouse lists. For a note on the book – Havilland Chepmell’s *Short Course of History* (1862) – upon which the Mouse’s “dry” story is based, see Gardner’s *The Annotated Alice* (1960: 46, n. 1).

<sup>22</sup> For a thorough discussion of female education in the Victorian era, see Fiske’s *Heretical Hellenism* (2008) and Jenkyns’s *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980).



“O Mouse, do you know the way out of this pool? I am very tired of swimming about here, O Mouse!” (Alice thought this must be the right way of speaking to a mouse: she had never done such a thing before, but she remembered having seen in her brother’s Latin Grammar, “A mouse – of a mouse – to a mouse – a mouse – O mouse!”)

Hence, in a humorous yet perceptive manner, Carroll refers to the problem of curious, intelligent girls having to fend for themselves if they were to learn the language of the Classics.

## The other *Wonderland* Fury

*Carroll’s revision of his original poem [“The Mouse’s Tale”] introduces a satire on the law, thus anticipating the bizarre trial of the Knave of Hearts.*  
(Kelly 2011: 70, n. 1)

There are only three instances of Carroll’s use of the word “fury” in *Wonderland*. This word is capitalised twice as a proper noun in “The Mouse’s Tale” and used once to describe the Queen of Hearts, during her confrontation with Alice in the chapter “The Queen’s Croquet Grounds”. Here Carroll continues to develop the theme of youth challenging the authority of age. When Alice first meets the tyrannical Queen of Hearts, Carroll’s heroine already doubts whether she should be obsequious (Carroll 1876: 116):

[...] the Queen said severely “Who is this?” She said it to the knave of Hearts, who only bowed and smiled in reply.

“Idiot!” said the Queen, tossing her head impatiently; and turning to Alice, she went on, “What’s your name, child?”

“My name is Alice, so please your Majesty,” said Alice very politely; but she added to herself, “Why, they are only a pack of cards, after all. I needn’t be afraid of them!”

While Alice is in this irreverent mood, the Queen poses another general question to the crowd around her, one about the identity of the three cards prostrated before her; yet only Alice has the courage to reply: “‘How should I know?’ said Alice, surprised at her own courage. ‘It’s no business of *mine*’” (emphasis in original; Carroll 1876: 116). The Queen, tellingly, responds with “fury”: “[t]he Queen turned crimson with fury, and, after glaring at her for a long moment like a wild beast, began screaming ‘Off with her head! Off—’” (117). This furious “wild beast” of a Queen is described in the same crimson colour and bestial associations of Aeschylus’ Furies (*The Furies* ll. 124–230, Muller 1835: 202). Thus, this episode continues the theme of conflict between age and youth that began in Chapter Three and it continues to make subtle allusions to Aeschylus, particularly as this playwright has his chorus of Furies refer to itself as a singular “Queen” in several instances in *The Furies*.

That Carroll had a Fury in mind when he describes the Queen is further shown by an article he published in 1887, “*Alice on the Stage*”. Carroll explains how he visualised and understood some of his *Wonderland* characters (1965b: 234): “I pictured to myself the Queen of Hearts as a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion – a blind and aimless Fury” (237). This Queen/Fury, who continually calls for hasty, unjust beheadings, is remarkably similar in spirit to Apollo’s description of the “furious wild beasts” with whom he contests: “It is quite improper that you [Furies] approach this temple – go rather where justice is decapitation [...] and slaughtered throats” (*F-O*, ll. 184–187). Because Carroll must have known that the Furies in Aeschylus’ play call themselves individually “Queen” upon several occasions, he connects the Queen of Hearts to the mythological Queen Furies, and, I argue, to the Fury of “The Mouse’s Tale”, while having her subscribe to their ancient concept of “justice”.<sup>23</sup> Like Aeschylus’ Furies, she calls for “sentence first – verdict afterwards” (Carroll 1876: 187), and decapitations seem to be her response to all transgressions. And, just as Mouse insulted the mythological Furies, a young Alice challenges this new Fury’s authority.

Alice’s insolent response near the end of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* suggests that her courage points to a type of maturity. As she confronts the Queen of Hearts for the last time near the end of her *Wonderland* journey, Alice’s growth seems complete. The Queen’s Fury-like concept of “justice” sets Alice on a course of direct opposition to the brutal monarch (Carroll 1876: 187):

“Let the jury consider the verdict,” the King said for about the twentieth time that day.  
 “No, no!” said the Queen. “Sentence first – verdict afterwards.”  
 “Stuff and nonsense!” said Alice loudly. “The idea of having the sentence first!”  
 “Hold your tongue!” Said the Queen, turning purple.  
 “I won’t!” said Alice.  
 “Off with her head! The Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.  
 “Who cares for you?” said Alice, (she had grown to her full size by this time.) “You are nothing but a pack of cards!”

It is ambiguous whether this growth is ultimately a positive or a negative outcome for Carroll’s child-heroine. After all, Aeschylus’ original Furies warned that “insolence is child to irreverence” (*F-O*, l. 534). However, the mythological Furies’ warning probably needs to be taken with a grain of salt, because the politically moderate Aeschylus sympathised with parts of both the old and new traditions (Muller 1835: 107–108, 210).

<sup>23</sup> In *Dissertations on the Eumenides of Aeschylus* (835: 133), Muller points out that in the mythological tradition Apollo takes over the role of avenger of blood from the Furies. Carroll seems aware of this transfer of roles when at the end of *Wonderland* he compares the “Queen’s shrill cries to the voice of the shepherd boy” (1876: 191–192). The latter is an iconic portrayal of Apollo, the god as a young shepherd. For Apollo as a young shepherd, see Lempriere’s *Classical Dictionary* (1984: 67).

In an article Carroll published in *Vanity Fair*, some eight years before “*Alice on the Stage*”, he associates indirectly the Furies with dogs, and links both to *Wonderland*. In one of his Doublets – a game of turning one word into another through a series of letter changes – he asks his readers to “Stow FURIES in BARREL” (in Collingwood 1961: 282). Within the answer he provides, the fourth change is to the word “BARKED” (285). Moreover, Carroll links this game of Doublets to *Wonderland*, by claiming that he invented these puzzles when (278):

[...] two young ladies – smarting under the sorest scourge of feminine humanity, the having ‘nothing to do’ – besought me to send them ‘some riddles.’ But riddles I had none at hand, and therefore set myself to devise some other form of verbal torture which would serve the same purpose.<sup>24</sup>

The direct reference to “The Mouse’s Tale” (through the words “having ‘nothing to do’”, as well as the more implicit contextual references to the “sorest scourge” and “verbal torture”) point once more to the *Wonderland* Fury/Furies and to its/their literary predecessors, the mythological Furies, especially those in Aeschylus’ *The Furies*.

Carroll’s decision to introduce Greek mythology, and particularly the gruesome Furies, into parts of his books for children adds to a great many other funny yet puzzling instances of his parodying well-known authors and texts within his stories. His best friend from this period, George MacDonald, also devotes large sections of *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and especially *The Princess and Curdie* (1883) to an elaboration of the nature of vengeance, by basing aspects of two of his main characters – the two Irenes – on the Erinyes/Furies (Soto 2008: 65–81). While MacDonald studied the nature of the Furies and the roles of justice and vengeance in his book, Carroll seems much more interested in parodying all of these in his own “nonsensical,” comedic manner. Thus, it seems that these two friends and literary confidants both liked to include hidden mythological references to the Furies in their books, although for different reasons.

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<sup>24</sup> For an explanation of the game of Doublets, and Carroll’s full account of its genesis in the article in *Vanity Fair*, see Collingwood’s *Diversions and Digressions of Lewis Carroll* (1961: 278).

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## Fernando J. Soto

Samostalni znanstvenik, Trail, Kanada  
Privatgelehrter, Trail, Kanada

### Duga i žalosna mišja priča: Carrollova dosjetljiva uporaba Eshila i drugih grčkih izvora

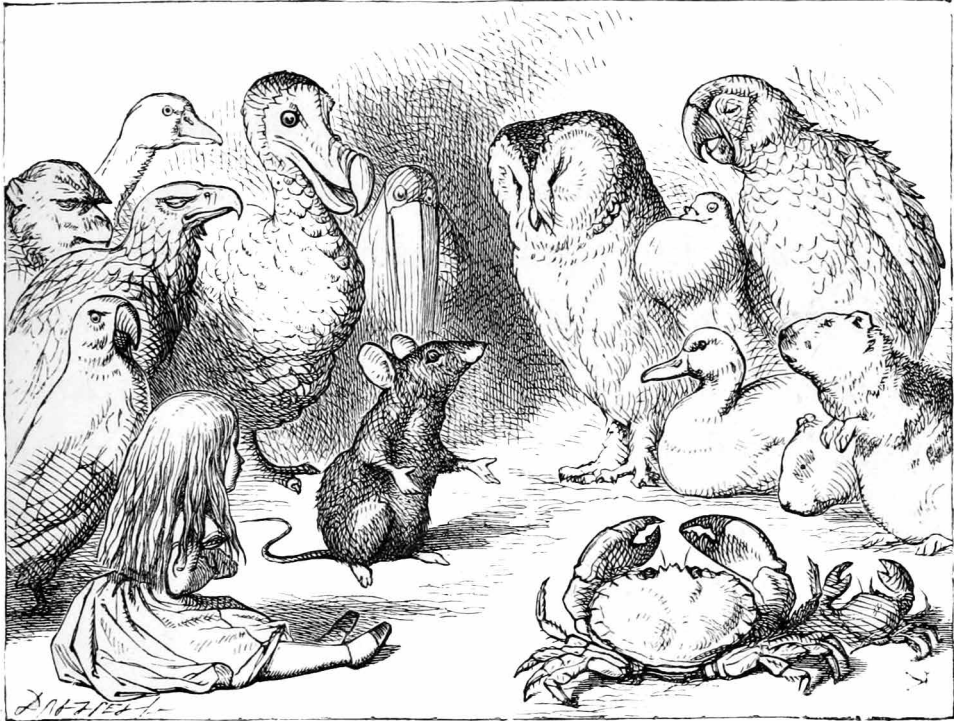
Cilj je rada ponuditi pomno čitanje Carrollove „Mišje priče“, pri čemu se posebna pozornost posvećuje grčkoj mitološko-dramskoj tradiciji. Čitanje polazi od pretpostavke da su sudionici najpoznatijega suđenja antičke grčkomitološke tradicije, Furije i Apolon, preteče likova Furije i Miša koji sudjeluju u suđenju opisanome u Carrollovoj stihovanoj priči.

**Ključne riječi:** Furije, Apolon, Orest, *Smintheus*, Miš, mladost/starost, patrijarhat/matrijarhat, Eshil, Homer

### Eine lange und traurige Mausgeschichte: Carrolls raffinierter Griff nach Aischylos und nach anderen altgriechischen Quellen

Im Beitrag wird Carrolls „Mausgeschichte“ textnah gelesen, wobei diesbezüglich der Tradition der altgriechischen Mythologie bzw. deren Dramenproduktion besondere Aufmerksamkeit gewidmet wird. Eine solche Lesart geht von der Annahme aus, dass die Teilnehmer an dem bekanntesten Gerichtsfall aus der antiken griechisch-mythologischen Tradition, die Furien und Apollon, Vorbilder für die Gestalten der Furie und der Maus abgeben, die dann an dem in Carrolls Versgeschichte beschriebenen Gerichtsprozess teilnehmen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Furien, Apollon, Orestes, *Smintheus*, Maus, Jugend/Alter, Patriarchat/Matriarchat, Aischylos, Homer



The Mouse tells his tale. Sir John Tenniel. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865, p. 29.

Miš priča svoju priču. Sir John Tenniel. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865., str. 29.